

# TLC Showcase

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AMANDA EPE

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## Introduction to *Fly Girls*

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**F**LY GIRLS a children's book is part of the FLY titles, aviation and adventure collections for young people and young adults. The book shares stories of three biographies of fearless females from the African diaspora in the USA and UK who had challenging circumstances including grief; economic deprivation and exclusion yet surmounted these circumstances to attain their dreams with missions to empower others in their community. Bessie Coleman the first African American and Native American woman with a pilot's license, Dr Ola Brown the pioneer of West African healthcare with Flying Doctors and Kimberly Anyadike the youngest person to fly across America from coast to coast are phenomenal 20th and 21st century true stories. The biographies spoke to me deeply, when they say stories come to you it's not what you want to write but what stories need to be told, this was the case here. I've always wanted to write for children and these aviation pioneers gave me worthy stories to be told and celebrated, particularly as there is a lack of black characters in fiction, and historical non-fiction in children's books. I think it's important also for girls to see role models away from the mainstream images presented, encouraging them into STEM subjects as well as to be active, adventurous and have aspirations.

Antonia Prescott was appointed by The Literary Consultancy as a reader to assess my manuscript. Having an experienced publishing professional in children's writing made all the difference to sharpen my manuscript, she shared gems on writing techniques that creative writers need in their toolkit. Having the assessment was a real boost to my confidence, I've attempted a few times to write a children's book without professional feedback and I lost faith in the idea. Prescott went over my concerns on editorial questions and her faith in my manuscript advising me to seek traditional publishing or continue publishing independently gave me the assurance I needed.

I'm glad to have collaborated with TLC, now having a children's book ticked off my bucket list.

## Extract from *Fly Girls* by Amanda Epe

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### **She Dreamed, Dared and Did: Bessie Coleman.**

Mama Coleman soothed Bessie's sore feet, massaging them from the four-mile daily walk to school and back. It was a Friday evening and the miles had accumulated. The relaxing massage allowed her mind to wander. She loved to dream. *If only I could fly and give my poor feet a break. They need a rest from the walking,* she had thought. Most children would have missed a day or two but not Bessie Coleman. Bessie loved learning and she excelled in everything she was taught. She mastered all her subjects and was ahead in her mathematics lessons. "This is a compass. Look, I've written it down. Say C-c-c-om..." Bessie was showing her young sisters her mathematics set.

Susan Coleman's eyebrows rose as she looked at the school letter. She scratched her scalp between the neatly placed black cornrowed hairstyle, before continuing to massage her daughter's feet.

"I need to buy a math set. The letter says that the school can lend me this one for a week, but I need to buy my own."

"Yes, Bess my darling. God will provide us money for you to have your very own," her mother said. Bessie would regularly help her parents read after school. They were unable to read because they had not been allowed to attend school. Although her parents had been born free to slaved parents, the laws did not allow enslaved people to read and write. Bessie was the first of her family to become literate, and she helped others in her family understand the meanings of words.

"Bessie, it's my turn! That was my jam," Georgia yelled, as they scooped turn by turn the cornmeal porridge Mama had made for them. "Mama, when can I have my own bowl? Bessie ate all my jam!"

Bessie slowed down. She knew she had gobbled up their favourite snack desperately. The trudge home from the one-room schoolhouse had weakened Bessie, draining her energy and toughening her toes as she trekked. But she still had a soft spot for her little sister. "You can finish the rest of the porridge, and I've left you the big blob

of jam." Bessie felt a twinge in her stomach and heard it groan for three minutes. The massage Mama had given her had kissed the surface of the pain in her feet, and the food had filled a tiny space in her stomach. She needed to lie down. "Thank you, Mama. My feet feel better, and the porridge was tasty." She excused herself from the table to the far corner of the room.

Elois and Nilus had eaten before Bessie. Her brothers John, Isaiah and Walter were next to share the bowl and sit around the tiny table. The eldest, Lilah and Alberta, always waited patiently for the last of the siblings to eat. They helped their mother churn the cornmeal and wash the plates after each group had finished. The thirteen children huddled together to eat, live, laugh, learn and sleep. Their echoes expanded and enlivened the tiny living room.

It was a frosty night. The Coleman children draped themselves in blankets, told stories and played. The aroma of sweet cinnamon in the porridge and the steam from the stew Mama was cooking brought warmth to their shelter.

"Catch the bean bag, Bessie!" John chucked it over to Isaiah, and they threw it back and forth.

"*You gonna* be piggy in the middle forever, Bess," Isaiah teased. Bessie's face twisted up. She didn't want to catch the bean bag or play any of their games, but her brothers didn't get it. They were happy to play.

"Wait Bess, let's play one more game before you go to your room," John pleaded.

John was really happy that Dad had moved them to Waxahachie, Texas and built a house with three rooms because he remembered how they had used to live.

"Put the ball down NOW, John! Everyone needs to sleep." Papa Coleman would raise his voice, as John made a racket in the dirt-floored one-room cabin they had previously lived in. John would bounce his ball as it pounded harshly onto the bare floorboards.

On this particular night, when Bessie was beaten down and famished, the last thing she wanted to do was play. As darkness set in, and the distant street lamp flickered on and off, Bessie knew she wouldn't be able to read over her schoolbooks until the

light of day on Saturday morning.

“Good night Lilah, Alberta, Bess, Georgia and Elois, and remember to say your own prayers.” Mama had said the Lord’s Prayer with them and individually kissed them goodnight, blowing the lamp out before she left their room.

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## About the Writer

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Amanda Epe an alumna of University of London enjoys life-writing including poetry, essays, memoirs and biographies. Her debut memoir *A Fly Girl Travel Tales* won the One Big Book Launch prize to launch in the Free Word Centre in 2015, and was listed as a best travel memoir to read in 2020 by The Mirror.



She has also shared her memoirs in *FLY HIGH: A Guide to Pilot and Air Cabin Crew Training*, co-authored with Rasheed Graham. Passionate about inclusion for BAME women she penned the biographies of three aviation pioneers in *FLY GIRLS*. Her essays, memoirs and poems have been published in several anthologies and literary journals including Saraba Literary Magazine.

Amanda was commissioned by Inanimatorz to write a poem for Brent 2020, The Mayor of London's Borough of Culture Programme. She plans to continue writing poetry and to develop her writing for children. She is a lover of being active, outdoors and walking in nature, which gives her lots of inspiration.

You can connect with her on social media:

Instagram [@iamamandaepe](#)

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