In 1884, Belva Lockwood accepted the nomination of the Equal Rights Party of the United States and received over 4,000 votes for President. This picture book biography engagingly tells that story, as well as highlighting Belva’s many other significant and ground-breaking accomplishments. The book includes an author’s note that amplifies the text and provides information on the electoral process, a glossary of key terms, and a time line of key events in women’s suffrage in the United States.

Sudipta Bardham-Quallen is the author of a number of children’s books, both fiction and nonfiction. Ballots for Belva showcases her research skills and ability to present a quantity of factual information in palatable form. Courtney Martin, a first time children’s book illustrator, ably and creatively illuminates the fact-laden text, effectively animating Belva’s world.

Bardham-Quallen structures the text on a sturdy framework: a repeated metaphor, excerpts from Belva’s correspondence and speeches, and reproductions of other contemporaneous materials. In the first full spread, ten-year-old Belva is depicted trying to move a mountain by faith alone. This mountain-moving metaphor, representing Belva’s belief in her ability to do the impossible, unifies the text when it appears in several later refer-
ences. Belva’s own words propel the text; “will-power and mental effort, combined with indefatigable labor” (unpaged) enable her to accomplish anything. To show the temper of the times, the author reproduces one of the law school rejection letters the thirty-nine-year-old Belva received: “such admission…would be likely to distract the attention of the young men” (unpaged). This quote is typical of the historical material presented by the author, which is both interesting and enhances the verisimilitude of the text.

Courtney Martin’s illustrations enliven and enrich the factually dense text. Each colorful and historically accurate spread depicts a critical feature in the accompanying text. The illustrator adds a feline companion to Belva’s persona to give “Belva a softer, more human side to which people and children of all ages can subconsciously relate” (personal correspondence 3 Feb. 2009). The cat appears in every key illustration, providing a unifying element to the book, similar to the author’s use of the mountain-moving metaphor. Martin’s technique is to scan her black and white pencil drawings into the computer and color them digitally using Photoshop. The resulting images are very rich in color and texture, providing an effective backdrop to the superimposed text. Ballots for Belva is significant for its positive portrayal of an important and interesting historical person who has been largely overlooked. Belva’s unremitting fight for equality for women is inspirational to all who persist in seeking that goal, as well as to those who face societal rejection for the pursuit of their dreams. In reading about Belva’s pursuit of human equality—a goal as yet not fully realized in this country—children also learn about America’s political process.

Works Cited
Martin, Courtney A. E-mail to Antoinette M. Tadolini. 3 Feb. 2009.

About the Author
Antoinette (Toni) Tadolini is a lawyer and independent scholar of children’s literature with a particular interest in picture books. She received her M.A. with an emphasis in children’s literature from the Kansas State University.