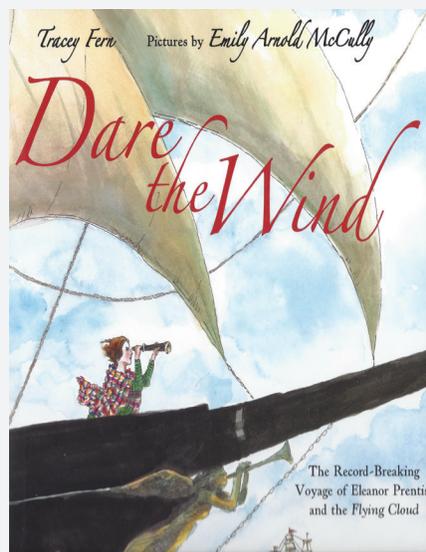


## First Opinion: Dare the Wind: A Study in Feminism and Impressionism

Fern, Tracey. *Dare the Wind: The Record-Breaking Voyage of Eleanor Prentiss and the Flying Cloud*. Illus. Emily Arnold McCully. New York, NY: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 2014. Print.

Kevin Thomas



During the Gold Rush, navigator Ellen Prentiss led a record-breaking voyage from New York to San Francisco by going around South America; she and her crew made the trip in far less time than anyone had ever done. The emblematic story of pioneering West through and around some of the most threatening natural obstacles is told by Tracey Fern in this wonderful picture book, *Dare the Wind*.

Upon my first glance at the book cover, my eyes were drawn to a figure crouched on the deck of a ship wearing a colorful, ragged shawl and holding up and peering through a spyglass, with a stern and focused look on her face. It is Ellen Prentiss riding on the *Flying Cloud* and gazing into the unknown. The choppy lines and strokes and the blended colors in Emily Arnold McCully's pictures seem to enact some of the qualities and styles found in impressionism—a 19th century movement of art which emerged in the decades following Prentiss's famous voyage. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "the most conspicuous characteristic of Impressionism in painting was an attempt to accurately and objectively record visual reality in terms of transient effects of light and color." These sorts of transient effects are seen in the

images throughout, but especially in the depictions of water. The pictures then, not only help the reader imagine the world of that time, but through an aesthetic lens similar to that which many people were beginning to use to depict the world, by artists in Europe and later in the U.S. who were pioneers in their own right.

Fern's beautiful poetic lines and use of language fill the book. Alliteration and thematic metaphors that draw the reader into the book are provided with fantastic imagery which couples nicely with the artwork. On the last page, Fern writes, "Ellen's heart raced like a riptide as she watched the red hills of San Francisco rise slowly over the horizon" (unpaged).

In line with the theme of this journal issue, I feel this is a good book for teaching children about the history of women in science. Prentiss is not only a brave pioneer of the ocean, but also in the social realm as well. On the first page, the narrator states, "While other girls spent their days stitching samplers and sweeping floors, Ellen spent her days at the shore in Marblehead, Massachusetts" (Fern, unpaged). This reveals the well-established social norms for women and girls that existed at the time and which still linger. Further, the narrator says, "most people thought her papa was a fool, teaching a girl the ways of the sea." This would suggest that Ellen's father was not fully bound by such social restrictions and likely played a strong role in helping her break through them—though, as mentioned in the Author's Note in the back of the book, he "most likely taught her navigation because he did not have any sons to follow in his footsteps." Ellen's life exemplifies the viewpoints of many liberal feminists—feminist who support equal opportunities for women (Clark and Fink 102): if her father did have a son, and she then did not receive the same opportunity, we might not know who Ellen Prentiss was, much less that she was a famous navigator; and history would be left with one less female scientist.

When Roger Clark and Heather Fink discuss liberal feminism, they refer to a study done by Weitzman that found that on the relatively rare chance that a non-stereotyped female protagonist appeared, they "were likely to be shown as being dependent on masculine assistance for getting them out of one fine mess or another" (102–3). Considering this point, I discovered there are a few moments in *Dare the Wind* when Prentiss makes a crucial decision that is preceded with the narrator's reference to advice that her father had given her. His advice that "A true navigator must have the caution to read the sea, as well as the courage to dare the wind" is referred to on two separate occasions while Prentiss is contemplating a difficult decision during the journey, and only after she remembers the advice does she act. This, though seemingly subtle, seems to resemble what was described by Weitzman.

On a different note, I would have liked to have learned more about Ellen's early life. We are taken on a sort of "fast current" through these parts of her life and then straight into the story of her famous voyage, though there is a brief biography in the Author's Note. All in all, Fern and McCully did a very fine job with this book and I would certainly recommend it.

### **Works Cited**

Clark, Roger, and Heather Fink. "Picture this: A multicultural feminist analysis of picture books for children." *Youth and Society* 36.1 (2004): 102–125. Web. 8 Nov. 2014.

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### **About the Author**

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