
ILLUSTRATOR SPOTLIGHT



Kristy Caldwell on *Thanks to Frances Perkins*

ABOUT THE BOOK

How many years will it be until you turn sixty-two? What year will that be? Once you've read *Thanks to Frances Perkins*, you'll know why these are important questions—and why you may want to thank Frances Perkins.

After Frances Perkins witnessed the Triangle Waist Factory fire in 1911, she was forever changed. While some activists pressed factory owners for change, Frances decided to work to bring about new laws that would force employers to treat people better and make workplaces safer. When she became Secretary of Labor in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration—the first woman cabinet member—Frances had the opportunity to make real her bold vision of a country where no one was left out. As a result of the Social Security program that she created, we have built a society where we help one another.

Q: What did you like most about illustrating this book?

A: I always enjoy the research stage. Reading about Frances and getting to know her as a person was very rewarding. When I work on a story about someone I feel like I'm building a connection to them, and trying to solve the puzzle of how to encourage other people to feel that same connection.

Q: Did anything in particular inspire your illustrations?

A: I was stylistically inspired by the era in which she lived, especially the advertisements. There are little nods to them here and there. What I really wanted to do was show that she didn't just work behind a desk. I wanted to show how active she was within the community, and how many people she personally reached out to. I wanted to make sure that community was on display as much as she was.

Q: Was there anything different about illustrating this story than your past books?

A: It was a different process because of the amount of texture. I've been wanting to incorporate paint into my illustrations for a long time, and I finally have a scanner that allowed me to do that. Frances' world was textured and layered, and I wanted to show that. She was born into privilege but was moved to pursue an unromantic, difficult career in social work and activism. I didn't want the art to look too clean.

Q: What sort of research did you have to do before illustrating *Thanks to Frances Perkins*?

A: I read a very good biography of Frances, *The Woman Behind the New Deal*. Because I'm in New York I was able to trace her footsteps through Manhattan, walking through old tenement areas, Washington Square Park, the site of the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire. There are also plenty of available, archived news articles from that era that give you a sense of the tone.

Q: What is your illustration process like? Does your process change from book to book?

A: My process does change from book to book. I like to push myself to really inhabit the feeling of the story. Once the sketches are approved, I start drawing the environments, to set the stage. Then I bring in the characters. The color is the last thing I do. It's a very layered process that allows me to focus on one thing at a time.

Q: If you could only use one medium to illustrate a story, which one would you pick and why?

A: One thing about me is that I am a perfectionist, but I don't always love where it takes me. Often I like my sketches better than my finished work. I'd probably choose a material that would force me to loosen up. I love working with ink, and I could see doing a whole book that way, with various inks. I'd also like to try gouache, because I see such beautiful results from other people. The other day I bought a pack of regular crayons and have really been enjoying drawing with them.

Q: What scene was your favorite to illustrate? Why?

A: I enjoyed the scene where she visits the tenements, because I wasn't sure I could pull it off. I really wanted to use this device of peeling back the outer layer of the buildings to show what was going on inside. And so that was fun to try.

Q: What was your favorite part about working with Deborah Hopkinson's text?

A: I've been a fan of Deborah's for a long time. One of my favorite things about her text is that it left a lot of room for me to make choices about what to show in the scenes. That's a big challenge, but a fun one.

Q: What were some challenges you faced while working on this project?

A: A lot of Frances' achievements were the result of long, long hours spent behind a desk and in meetings. One challenge was to try to show that in an interesting way. I think another challenge of biographies—especially short ones—is how to make the character feel real. We are learning about their achievements, but we also want to connect with them. And so that's a big challenge: helping the story feel relatable to the reader.

Q: What do you admire most about Frances Perkins?

A: She was very savvy. I'm in awe of how savvy she was, and how strongly she advocated for herself. She probably annoyed a lot of people, because she refused to let anyone shut her down. She just kept going, and she really didn't compromise her goals.

Q: What about Frances' story stuck with you the most? Why?

A: What sticks with me is how she listened to workers' needs and didn't dismiss things that could have seemed like details: for instance, when she helped workers get chairs with backs, so they didn't have to spend long hours on stools. That sounds like such a minor thing in the larger scope of "workers' rights," but she knew it would have a huge impact on each of those workers. She fought for safer conditions, but also comfortable conditions.

Q: What message do you want young readers to take away from this story?

A: I'd like them to believe that each of them can individually make change in the world, if they devote themselves to that change. And I'd like them to also realize that big changes can take a long time, but are still worth fighting for. Frances worked her whole life for the changes she made, and we are still enjoying the results right now, a hundred years later.

Q: What advice would you give to aspiring illustrators?

A: I guess I would tell aspiring illustrators to push themselves in many directions. I don't know if that's the usual kind of advice, but I just think the world is so vast and interesting, and I see a lot of young illustrators feeling like they have to focus on coming up with one very specific, very slick illustration style, without thinking as deeply about the storytelling. To me, the storytelling is the most rewarding and interesting part of it, and personally I know I have such a long way to go before I'm doing my best work there.

Q: What's next for you?

A: I have a new book with Scholastic coming out in November, and I'm working on a couple of stories of my own right now. I'm not sure what I'll do with them, but I feel very inspired lately to spend time with that part of the process. I really admire the authors I've been able to work with, and I hope I've learned something from them.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Kristy Caldwell received an MFA in Illustration from the School of Visual Arts. She lives in New York.

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