

The Boston Globe

BOOKS

‘I Survived’ author to young readers: ‘You are not just a helpless victim of this chaotic time’

By Christy DeSmith Globe Staff, Updated October 30, 2020, 3:11 p.m.

Children’s literature, at least not the good stuff, has never shied from the disturbing. Many grade-schoolers today have a taste for the especially dark “I Survived” series by Connecticut author Lauren Tarshis. These best-selling books turn historic disasters into historical fiction, always centered on the story of one young character. Published by Scholastic, the 20-title series debuted in 2010 with “I Survived the Sinking of the Titanic.” Subsequent arrivals include “I Survived the Attacks of September 11” and “I Survived the Great Molasses Flood,” set here in Boston amid the sticky explosion that hit the North End in 1919, killing 21 people.

Tarshis’s exhaustively researched books hew close to facts. Children are displaced from homes. They lose parents and siblings and body parts. The Globe caught up with the author via Zoom to discuss why youngsters can’t resist these real-life tragedies.



Q. Tell me about the inspiration for “I Survived.”

A. I’ve been at Scholastic for many, many years as an editor and writer in the classroom magazine division. Part of the inspiration came from noticing that when I could find a child from history and spin a story around their experience — those were the stories where I got the most letters.

I also have four children myself. And three of my four kids were reluctant readers. I was

always looking for stories for them. As my son Dylan once said, “I want to read about a really cool topic like a tornado but I don’t want it to be just facts. I want there to be a lot of suspense. And I want the main character to be a boy like me.” I was sort of surprised there already wasn’t a series like that, sort of between “Magic Tree House” and “The Lightning Thief.”

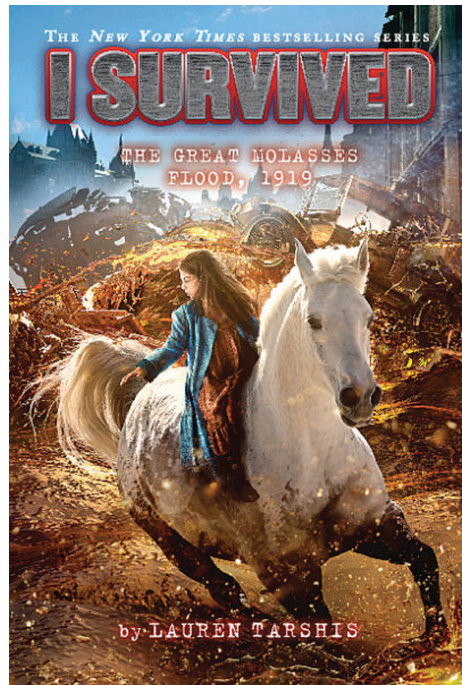
Q. I confess to being weirded out when my second-grader brought home “I Survived the Destruction of Pompeii,” just before the lockdown last spring. But we were reading “I Survived the Great Molasses Flood” the other day when it occurred to me — this was a lesson on resilience.

A. That’s the whole theme of the series. The next one I’m working on is the Galveston flood [of 1900], because a lot of kids from Texas have asked, “Why haven’t you written about Galveston? That was the deadliest natural disaster in American history.”

I got this very funny e-mail from a kid that said: “Mrs. Tarshis, why do you write about topics that are so depressing — d-u-p-r-e-s-s-i-n-g.” I thought it was very cute. But then I thought, my goodness — he’s right. How can I sit here in the middle of a pandemic, reading about the Galveston flood? What could be worse? But I have these incredible compendiums of oral histories by people who survived the flood. And they’re so inspiring. You read about people who 25, 30 years later became leaders in the city. And the experience of that flood was the turning point in their lives. So I wrote back to the kid and I said, strangely, I’ve become a more hopeful person.

Q. I notice the main character in “The Great Molasses Flood” loses a parent to the Spanish flu.

A. I read so much about the influenza pandemic for that book, which came out in January. And then we were in lockdown in March. It was really eerie. If you



read [historian] John Barry’s book, it’s called “The Great Influenza,” there are literally whole chapters where you can copy and paste: It was a mysterious disease. A lot of resentment. Kids wearing masks. Churches closed, schools closed, kids learning at home, the second wave. There’s a lot of lessons in there for us.

Q. Are you considering a book about COVID-19?

A. I have mixed feelings about it. When I talk about my books to kids

I always say, “Here’s a really interesting thing to ask yourself — how did this event change our ideas about things?” We don’t know how COVID-19 is going to change our lives and our world. It could be something profound like 9/11. Or it could be like the locust plagues that I wrote about in [“I Survived the Children’s Blizzard, 1888”]. Nobody’s heard of them. It was very much like COVID, in that it was an absolute calamity and great scientific minds were trying to understand it. But it didn’t actually change that much.

Q. Any last words for your readers during this unsettling time?

A. I’m encouraging kids, aggressively, to keep track of their experiences and feelings. I keep saying — you’re going through a really special time. When you’re older, your grandchildren will want you to come to their classes and tell their friends what it was like. You are not just a helpless victim of this chaotic time. You are a voice. And you have agency in how we talk about it.