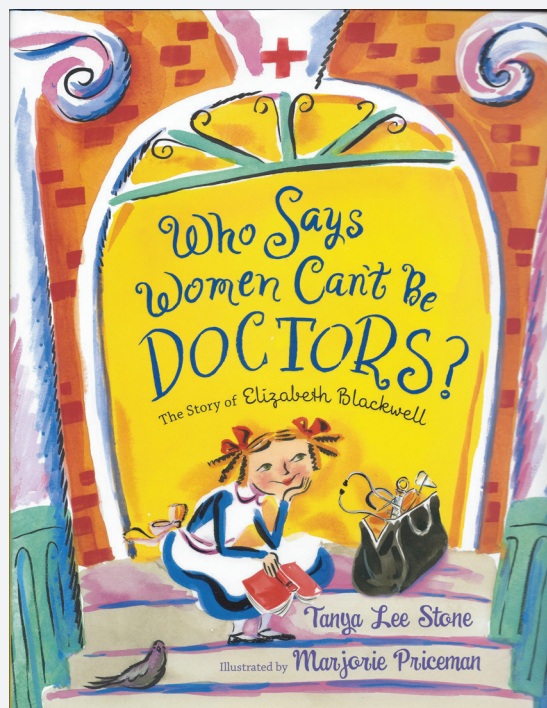


## First Opinion: Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?

Stone, Tanya Lee. *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors? The Story of Elizabeth Blackwell*. Illus. Marjorie Priceman. New York, NY: Holt, 2013. Print.

*Gretchen McClain and Catherine Compton-Lilly*



Most of us have either been to women doctors or know someone who is a woman and a doctor. Female doctors are common; they make up at least half of the physicians on clinic rosters, not to mention over half of the students currently in medical school (Stone, Author's Note). Tanya Lee Stone's *Who Says Women Can't be Doctors?*, illustrated by Marjorie Priceman, reminds us of the difficult journey traversed by the first woman doctor to break the barrier of sexism which once kept women from even thinking about medical school.

*Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?* is a testament to being both female and a doctor. The preliminary pages, which feature brightly colored illustrations, juxtapose girly fixings and medical supplies, including a stethoscope laced through a fancy necklace. Before even reading the book, one is given the distinct impression that practicing medicine can be a feminine enterprise.

Stone begins by reminding her audience of the limitations placed on women in the 1830s. Women were delegated to the roles of "wives and mothers. Or maybe teachers, or seam-

stresses" (3). This introduction contrasts with the narrative that follows—the story of Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor. Elizabeth's narrative begins with a description of her in her childhood when she is presented as a strong and curious youth, albeit a "tiny wisp of a girl" (5). Her proclivity towards medicine is evident in her curiosity, via wanting "to explore around every corner" (5); her toughness in "sleeping on the hard floor . . . just to toughen up" (6); and her pushing the limits by climbing up to her roof and stretching out as far as possible with a spyglass "to see what was happening on the other side of town" (7).

As one might expect, Elizabeth faced great opposition to becoming a doctor. While in her youth "blood made her queasy" (8), she faced much greater hurdles when she attempted to enter medical school. Women were denied entrance into these institutions simply because they were women. The illustrations reveal the thinking of her time: "women are much too weak for such hard work" and "women aren't smart enough" (15). After 28 rejections from medical schools, she finally got a "yes." The fact that her acceptance started as a joke made by a male student body left her undaunted. Rather, this new medical student won the male students over with her intelligence, and soon "the boys wanted to know what Elizabeth thought about this or that" (28). *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?* ends with other women, medical bags in hand, following the path she opened for them to the clinic door.

Stone provides a more detailed biography of Elizabeth's life in the "Author's Note" where we learn that even after she had gone on to "become the first woman doctor in America" (30), she continued to face opposition when she opened her practice. But if you have been paying attention, you will know that she persevered. Thus, her triumphant legacy began. Elizabeth's unaffected attitude in the face of abject sexism is a powerful theme that resonates through the playful drawings and her relentless focus on becoming a doctor. The sources used by Stone are listed, adding credibility to a delightful picture book.

## **About the Authors**

**Gretchen McClain** is a doctoral student at the University of Wisconsin Madison. She is on a leave of absence from her high school in De Forest, Wisconsin, where she has taught English for 15 years. Her main area of study involves creating space for agency for both teachers and teachers and students in the classroom. She utilizes young adult literature and writing with choice.

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