

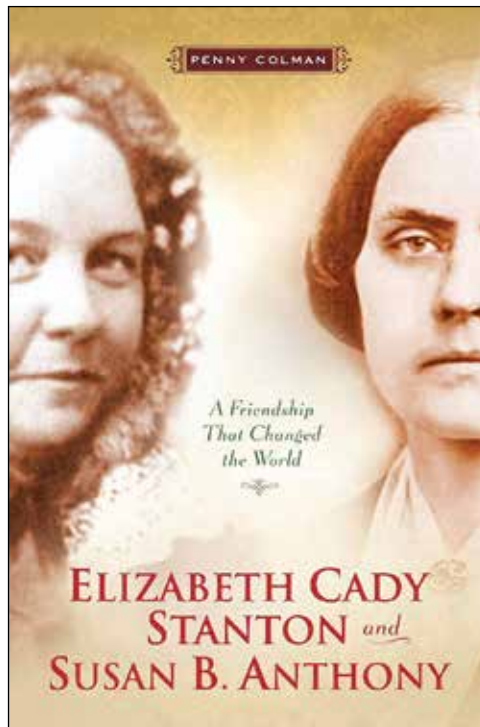
# A Powerful Biography of a Powerful Partnership: Stanton and Anthony

Andrea S. Libresco

*I forged the thunderbolts and she fired them.*<sup>1</sup> —Elizabeth Cady Stanton

Although Penny Colman’s book, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony: A Friendship that Changed the World*, is a 250-page chapter book that was not written for the elementary level, it ought to be on bookshelves in upper elementary classrooms everywhere. Reading proficiency in the intermediate grades varies wildly, and students reading above grade level deserve to have engaging, thoughtful, challenging works to read when teachers assign biography projects during women’s history month.

No stranger to writing non-fiction, Colman has tackled such diverse subjects as death (*Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial*); sanitation (*Toilets, Bathtubs, Sinks, and Sewers: A History of the Bathroom*); early American history (*Thanksgiving: The True Story*); women role models (*A Woman Unafraid: The Achievements of Frances Perkins, Breaking the Chains: The Crusade of Dorothea Lynde Dix, Adventurous Women: Eight True Stories About Women Who Made a Difference*), and women’s history (*Rosie the Riveter: Women Working on The Home Front in World War II, Where the Action Was: Women War Correspondents in World War II, Girls: A History of Growing Up Female in America*). In addition to her research and writing, Colman does extensive picture research and takes photographs for her books. [Full disclosure: I took a course on non-fiction from Penny Colman a decade ago and found her to be a passionate advocate for the use of non-fiction in the classroom. Also, we named our first-born Leah Anthony and, had our second child been a girl, she would have been Rebecca Cady.]



legal right to own property, enter into contracts, sign legal documents, or control what happens to her wages or to her children. When almost a million African American women are held in chattel slavery. When women are not allowed to vote (1-2).

Students will be outraged by and are likely to remember these conditions in which nineteenth century women lived when they come upon the Declaration of Sentiments later in the book.

The book is arranged chronologically in four sections; Part I begins with Stanton and Anthony’s upbringing, told in alternating chapters. After their meeting in 1851, their stories come together, and Part II goes through the Civil War. Part III chronicles the most difficult years of the struggle, and Part IV discusses the campaigns of their final years where, as Colman puts it, Stanton and Anthony go from “ridicule to reverence, ostracism to embrace” (xiii).

Colman knows that the story and the words of the historical actors need no embellishment; instead, her extensive use of quotations, well sourced at the end of the book, enhances the narrative. She examines the early experiences of

## “You Should Have Been a Boy”

The opening of this book draws us in, as Colman invites us to:

Imagine a time in America—When girls get much less education than boys do. When it is considered shocking, outrageous, scandalous for a woman to give a speech in public, especially to audiences of both men and women. When a married woman does not have the

the two women to see what led to their intense commitment to women’s rights activism. One of Stanton’s earliest memories came at age four; upon the birth of her sister Margaret, she heard people remark, “What a pity it is she’s a girl (8),” and, when she won a prize in Greek in school (where she was the only girl), her own father expressed his regret, “Ah, you should have been a boy (9)!” While these negative examples had their influence on

Stanton, so, too, did positive examples of activism; her cousin Gerrit Smith was an abolitionist who hid slaves fleeing north in his home and who introduced her to Quaker activist Lucretia Mott. Anthony grew up with Quaker influence and was the beneficiary of their views on equal education for boys and girls, although she also witnessed one branch of the Quakers refuse to welcome a freed black man in their meetinghouse.

### Being Shut Out

As they moved into adulthood, Colman relates the formative experiences that moved Stanton and Anthony toward women's rights issues. For Stanton, it was the refusal of the men at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in 1840 to allow women to be seated or to speak. It would be another eight years before Stanton could act on her outrage. At the time of Seneca Falls in 1848, Stanton had three children, aged six, four, and three. Anthony experienced her own jolt of awareness at a Sons of Temperance meeting to which the Daughters of Temperance had been invited. When she rose to speak, she was told, "The sisters were not invited there to speak but to listen and learn (61)." Anthony walked out. The temperance organization was not the only one that did not value the participation of women. Anthony found that the New York State Teacher's Convention was less than welcoming of her speeches as well, though her resolutions for equitable pay and full participation for women ultimately passed.

It should be clear from these examples of Stanton's and Anthony's activism that Colman does not confine her narrative to the two women's work in the suffrage movement. She also gives space to Stanton's attempts to change New York laws that discriminated against married women. A few excerpts from Stanton's 1854 speech to the legislature might have been included that would enhance the narrative, as the address, called "A Slave's Appeal," lays out effectively the lowly position of married women:

The wife who inherits no property holds about the same legal position that does the slave on the southern plantation. She can own nothing, sell nothing. She has no right even to the wages she earns; her person, her time, her services are the property of another. She cannot testify, in many cases, against her husband. She can get no redress for wrongs in her own name in any court of justice. She can neither sue nor be sued. She is not held morally responsible for any crime committed in the presence of her husband, so completely is her very existence supposed by the law to be merged in that of another.<sup>2</sup>

### Out of Fashion?

Colman also chronicles both women's attempts to take on dress reform. Women's clothing of the time period supported female submissiveness and passivity. Tight corset lacing closed off their lungs and pinched their inner organs together. Large

numbers of under garments and the weight of over dresses limited their physical mobility. Stanton and Anthony adopted Amelia Bloomer's new costume of baggy trousers and shorter dress for its practicality and potential for awakening women to an understanding of their oppression, but they did not expect the furor and ridicule it engendered. Colman provides Stanton's reasoning for their return to corsets, long skirts and greater respectability: "the physical freedom did not compensate for the persistent persecution and petty annoyances suffered at every turn" (75). (I wish she had included Anthony's as well: "The attention of my audiences was fixed upon my clothes instead of my words,"<sup>3</sup> but this is a minor quibble.)

### Family and Career

Colman is also attentive to the most formidable barriers to women's activism, as she gives space to Stanton's personal life as a mother of seven children. Stanton, herself, recognized the difficulty of her efforts to combine public affairs and maternity and made her apology to Anthony in the mid-1850s, "My whole soul is in the work, but my hands belong to my family" (75). When her sixth child was born in 1856, she wrote to Anthony of feeling like "a caged lioness longing to bring nursing and housekeeping cares to a close" (82). Mostly, Anthony did not accept that Stanton's activism or speechwriting should be curtailed by motherhood, and Colman details the hands-on help that Anthony provided so that Stanton could, as Anthony put it, "set your self about the work. Now will you load my gun, leaving me to pull the trigger & let fly the powder & ball—do get all on fire" (82).

### Partnership

I was not surprised to see on Penny Colman's website that she had visited both Stanton's and Anthony's houses. I have visited Stanton's home, and I remember two things in particular that the docent pointed out. First, when we were outside, she showed us the flat area where, every Monday, washday, Elizabeth would lay out her wash to dry. And I thought about what an onerous task that would be for that large family, in an out-of-the-way place where it was tough to get servants. And she pointed out a picture window that Stanton had put in so that, while she composed her speeches, she could keep an eye on her seven children. The fact that Anthony pitched in so that Stanton could continue to write speeches that did, indeed, fire up Anthony's audiences is testament to the importance of their historical partnership. As Stanton put it:

In writing we did better work together than either could alone. While she is slow and analytical in composition, I am rapid and synthetic. I am the better writer, she the better critic. She supplied the facts and statistics, I the philosophy and rhetoric, and together we have made arguments that have stood unshaken by the storms of thirty long years; arguments that no man has answered.<sup>4</sup>

Colman has not written a hagiography. She acknowledges the racist tone of Stanton when the Fifteenth Amendment was passed, granting African American men the right to vote but not extending that right to women of any color. Anthony argued that the new amendment “put two million more men in the position of tyrants” (125) (though it must be noted that the actual quote is a little harsher: “2,000,000 colored men in the position of tyrants over 2,000,000 colored women”<sup>5</sup>). It is always a challenge in children’s literature to decide what to exclude, but I wish Colman had spent a little more time here examining this gender versus race issue; we have only to look at the rhetoric of the 2008 Barack Obama-Hillary Rodham Clinton primary about whose time it was to be president, African Americans or women, to see that this issue remains with us today.

### **A Common Cause**

After the Civil War, former allies of Stanton and Anthony like Frederick Douglass (one of the signers of the Seneca Falls Declaration) stated, to great applause, that they could not see how anyone could pretend that there was the same urgency in giving the ballot to the woman as to the Negro. Anthony responded, “If Mr. Douglass had noticed who applauded when he said “black men first and white women afterwards,” he would have seen that it was only the men” he himself would not today exchange his sex and color with Elizabeth Cady Stanton.” Anthony’s core belief was that “the question of precedence has no place on an equal rights platform.”<sup>6</sup>

Some of the best aspects of the book relate small incidents of activism that tell the reader that Stanton and Anthony were always on the alert to rectify injustice. When Anthony brought Ida B. Wells, a fearless African American journalist, to stay at her home and instructed her stenographer to assist Wells with her correspondence, the stenographer said that she would not work for a black woman. Susan fired her (198). On a suffrage campaign swing through California, when Stanton and Anthony spent a day in the Calaveras Grove of giant sequoia trees, they discovered that many of the trees had been given the names of distinguished men. Colman shares the women’s reaction: “As for unnamed trees, Elizabeth and Susan tacked on cards (with their guide’s permission) with the names of distinguished women, including Lucretia Mott and Lucy Stone” (145). This story allows the reader to see that women’s rights involved more than suffrage, as does Colman’s inclusion of data on the change in women’s occupations over a 50-year period:

In the early 1830s, Harriet Martineau, a prominent English journalist, had toured America and found women employed in seven occupations: milliner, dressmaker, tailoress, seamstress, factory worker, teacher of young children, and domestic servant. In 1880, the census found women engaged in 350 occupations (162).

### **United We Stand**

Colman’s theme is Stanton and Anthony’s great partnership, and how, to the world, they presented a united front. As Stanton

put it, “each has the feeling that we must have no differences in public” (97). However, Colman also accords their differences the space they deserve. For example, she mentions the strain caused by Stanton’s publication of *The Woman’s Bible*. Anthony felt that the cause of women’s rights would be better served by a re-ordering of priorities on Stanton’s part: “Get political rights first and religious bigotry will melt like dew before the morning sun” (201); Stanton, however, felt that women first had to free their minds; a suffrage-first strategy was anathema to her.

I was surprised by an omission at the end of the book. Colman deals with Stanton’s and Anthony’s deaths (in 1902 and 1906, respectively) without relating the stories of their final minutes, which provide an interesting contrast. Stanton’s daughter recalled that two hours before her death, the 87-year-old woman had herself fully dressed and “drew herself up very erect and there she stood for seven or eight minutes, steadily looking out proudly before her. I think she was mentally making an address.”<sup>7</sup> Two hours later, she died in her sleep. Her obituary was written by an atheist, published in a secularist magazine and stressed the challenges Stanton had mounted against religious authority.

Anthony’s tribute, on the other hand, was written by Anna Howard Shaw, the first woman ordained as a Methodist minister and representative of Christian feminists. Shaw described the last afternoon of Anthony’s life: She suddenly began to utter the names of the women who had worked with her, as if in a final roll call. “Young or old, living or dead, they all seemed to file past her dying eyes that day in an endless, shadowy review, and as they went by, she spoke to each one of them, [thanking them for] the sacrifices they have made.”<sup>8</sup>

While the book can stand alone, with its 63 photographs, author’s note, epilogue, chronology, places to visit, namesakes, acknowledgments, source notes, bibliography, webography, photo credits, and index, it is worth noting that Colman has an excellent website that provides a reading guide and activities for teachers to share with their student.<sup>9</sup> Questions in the guide are upper level and include:

What do you see as Elizabeth’s and Susan’s strengths, and how did their strengths contribute to the chemistry of their relationships?

Talk about whether or not you are partial to Susan or Elizabeth or equally to both and did your feelings change as you read the book? Did you identify characteristics of either one or both of them in yourself or in someone you know well?

Discuss other characters who caught your attention and why, e.g., Lucretia Mott, Angelina and Sarah Grimke, Victoria Woodhull, Gerrit Smith, Frederick Douglass, etc.

As you read the many quotations from Elizabeth and Susan from throughout the book, which one(s) particularly resonated with you? Which one(s) do you think

best exemplifies your sense of Elizabeth herself, Susan herself, and them as friends? Which quote(s) exemplifies you as you see yourself or would like to see yourself?

What was your reaction as you read about the resistance to women's rights and the fact that Elizabeth and Susan died before women won the right to vote?

Why do you think that women like Elizabeth, Susan, Lucretia Mott, and Lucy Stone and the story of the fight for woman suffrage are not well known today?

Do you think that should change; if so, how would you start?

Activities on the website also require higher order thinking and highlight research (using the Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Online Catalog to make a photo album of the most interesting images of the struggle for women's suffrage); art (illustrating a scene from the book, such as Elizabeth's letter to her son Neil in which she describes what would happen if a bull was chasing them and her legs were encumbered by petticoats (65); drama (planning and performing a suffrage pageant or parade that Elizabeth and Susan would have enjoyed); mathematics and geography (figuring out the distance that Susan B. Anthony and George Train traveled during their two and a half week long speaking tour in Kansas in 1867 (120) and mapping the trip); and, of course, social studies—reviewing the Chronology (225–229) and adding five significant events that happened in other parts of the world.

Through her book and website, Penny Colman has painted a portrait of a 51-year partnership that fueled and sustained the

nineteenth century fight for women's rights, a partnership about which many Americans, young and old alike, may know little. This paired biography is an unusual one, as most biographies tell the story of only one important person. Penny Colman's choice to intertwine both women's stories is an excellent one, for the activist friendship of Elizabeth Cady Stanton (a mother of seven) and Susan B. Anthony (an unmarried former school teacher) allowed them to challenge the entrenched beliefs and laws that oppressed all women. Their long struggle can reinforce, for upper elementary students, Anthony's maxim, "Failure is impossible" (222), but their partnership may also teach them Martin Luther King's maxim, "We go farther faster when we go together." ●

#### Notes

1. Elisabeth Griffith, *In Her Own Right: The Life of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 74.
2. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Address to the Legislature of New York," in *The Selected Papers of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony*, Ann Dexter Gordon, ed., (vol. I, *In the School of Anti-Slavery, 1840-1866*) (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 246.
3. Kathleen Barry, *Susan B. Anthony: A Biography of a Singular Feminist* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988), 82.
4. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan Brownell Anthony, and Mathilda Gage, *History of Woman Suffrage* (vol. I) (Rochester, NY: Charles Mann, 1881), 379.
5. Barry, 193.
6. Barry, 193.
7. Ellen Carol DuBois, ed., *Elizabeth Cady Stanton/Susan B. Anthony: Correspondence, Writings, Speeches* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981), 265.
8. DuBois, 260.
9. "Penny Colman: Award Winning Author for All Ages," [www.pennycolman.com](http://www.pennycolman.com).

**ANDREA S. LIBRESCO** is a professor and graduate director of elementary education at Hofstra University in Hempstead, New York, and co-editor of *Social Studies* and the *Young Learner*.