

Figure 1 Thomas Eakins, Portrait of Henry O. Tanner, 1900, The Hyde Collection

## USING HISTORICAL RESEARCH TO CREATE A FICTIONAL CHARACTER

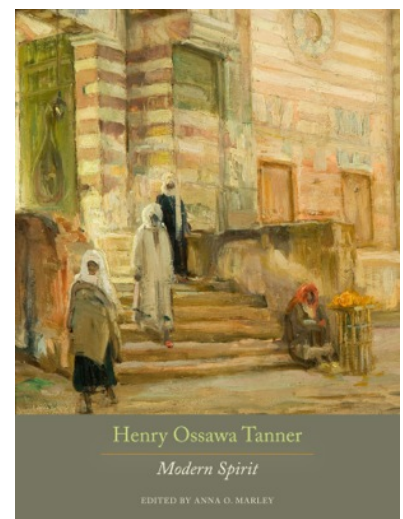
*Where did Solomon Brokenberry come from?*

By Sarah Sullivan

One of the best parts of writing is doing research. When I wrote *All That's Missing*, I needed to create a character who was an African American artist living sometime prior to 1950. I spent hours online and ordered used art history books and biographies. The artists' stories were fascinating. I loved looking at the work they created. Ultimately, it was Henry Ossawa Tanner upon whom I focused. I researched the details of his life in order to create a plausible biography for Solomon Brokenberry, the fictional artist in my novel. Solomon Brokenberry is not meant to be a stand-in for Henry Ossawa Tanner. Rather, I relied upon the facts of Tanner's life to create what would seem real in a fictional character. Purely by coincidence, it turned out that the first major American exhibition of Tanner's work

was being mounted around the time I was doing my research. As a result, there were new resources to consult. The exhibit opened in January, 2012 at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and traveled to the Cincinnati Art Museum and the Houston Museum of Fine Arts. (Here's a [link](https://www.pafa.org/exhibitions/henry-ossawa-tanner-modern-spirit).) (<https://www.pafa.org/exhibitions/henry-ossawa-tanner-modern-spirit>)

I ordered a copy of the [catalogue](#) and pored over it. If you are interested in learning more about Tanner and his work, I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I included an Author's Note at the end of *All That's Missing* in which I told a little about Tanner's life and included a list of resources upon which I relied in creating my fictional artist. This book is included among those resources.



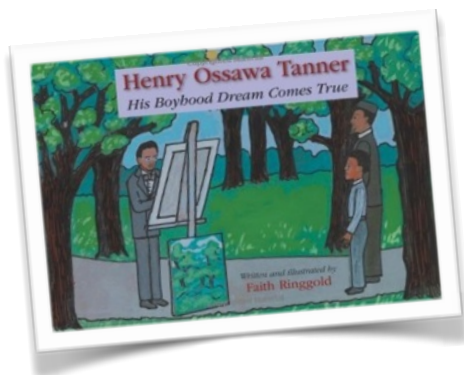
Tanner was the first African American artist whose work was made a part of the White House art collection. [The White House Foundation purchased his painting, “Sand Dunes at Sunset, Atlantic City,”](#) during the Clinton Administration.



Figure 2 View of Seine, Looking toward Notre Dame, 1896

As soon as his health was restored, Tanner auctioned as many of his paintings as he could and returned to Paris. He received his first major recognition there when his painting “Daniel in the Lion’s Den” received an Honorable Mention at the Salon in 1896.

[Faith Ringgold created a beautiful picture book](#) to accompany the 2012 exhibit, HENRY OSSAWA TANNER: MODERN SPIRIT. It was published by the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and provides an excellent introduction to Tanner and his work.



According to several sources, Tanner’s best-known work in the United States is “The Banjo Lesson,” shown here. It was painted after Tanner returned to the United States from Paris around 1892. He had fallen ill and was forced to come home to recuperate.



Figure 3 Banjo Lesson, 1893

There are certain gifts, which come with the hard work of writing. One of them is the reward of accomplishing a difficult task. Another is the gift of discovery that comes as a bit of serendipity along the way. Discovering the story of Henry Ossawa Tanner and his work was such a gift. If you do not know about him, here is a story you will be pleased to discover.