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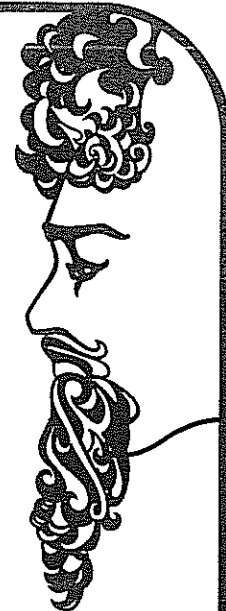
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Using Biography in the Elementary Classroom

by Dorothy N. Bowen



When biography first gained recognition as a genre for adults, it was not considered an appropriate form of literature for children. As it began to gain a place in children's literature, as was true of most books written for children at the time, biography was used as a tool for teaching children to emulate the hero. Norton notes, "Children's biographies written in the seventeenth throughout the nineteenth centuries in Europe and North America were affected by the didactic themes of the Puritan era, the Victorian emphasis on duty to God and parents, the values associated with the American frontier, and the belief that children should be educated in a highly structured environment" (670). The first Newbery prize awarded to a biography did not come until 1934. It went to *The Invincible Louisa: The Story of the Author of "Little Women"* by Cornelia Meigs.

Although we would still agree that one of the benefits of reading about an individual's life is to help a child identify with people of the past and the present, this should not replace the storytelling aspect that makes the person come alive to the child; for if it does so, children are likely to find biography dull and uninteresting. Russell Freedman, award-winning author of biography for children writes, "I think of myself first of all as a storyteller, and I do my best to give dramatic shape to my subject, whatever it may be" (138). What are some ways that the person whose life is told on the printed page can come alive to children? Let us look at some possibilities.

The school library media specialist

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is in a strategic place to make biography and other nonfiction exciting to children. Library media specialist Madeleine Hoss writes of one way that she brings biography to life and motivates her students to read through what she calls a "Biography party." She collaborated with an elementary classroom teacher to bring an author to the library media center. A student's mother with acting experience volunteered to take on the part of Louisa May Alcott. The students were not told ahead of time who the author would be, and when she was introduced and told the students that she began writing in her teens, the children were excited. She talked to the students about her character and some of the books she had written. The party was a great success and all of Alcott's books were checked out in a hurry.

Judy Freeman, also a library media specialist, has some exciting ideas for helping elementary teachers make a biography unit fun for children. In the first lesson, she booktalks a variety of biographies to create interest and then discusses with the children what makes a person famous. She uses the opportunity to review how to find biographies in a library. She then puts the students in pairs and gives them homemade laminated cards, each with a famous person's name on it. The students figure out how the call number would be formed from the person's last name and then go to the shelves to find the biography. The children find clues about the person by skimming the jacket and the book after which they report back to the class with one sentence such as, "Amelia Earhart was the first woman pilot to fly around the world."

Freeman has a second lesson in which she booktalks more biographies and talks with the children about how information for a biography might be found. She then distributes what she calls biography "brains," which are cards containing information about famous people. The "brain" contains

—Continued

a one- or two-sentence summary of the life and the call letters for the biography. These clues are used to go to the shelves and find a few facts about the person. The children present their mystery person by asking, "Who am I?" and sharing the facts. The rest of the class attempts to guess who it is.

Classroom teacher Pam Chandler believes, "If kids can see that many of these important people came from backgrounds similar to or even tougher than their own, maybe they will be the next generation of heroes and influential people.... Reading a well-written biography can make them come alive." Each of her students reads a biography of a person of his or her choice and then writes a monologue, dresses up as the individual, and performs the monologue for the class. She has found this to be a very successful way to present biography. One of her favorite memories is of a girl who took the part of Rosa Parks. "She walked to the front of the class as though she was exhausted, carrying her shoes in her hands. She set the shoes down in a nearby chair and began talking about her hard day at work and her need to sit down in the bus" (Bafile 2001).

Vicki Daugherty's fifth grade class at Model Lab School, Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky, has used a method similar to that of Pam Chandler to teach biography to her students. She began the unit by talking about what a biography is. The students then wrote their autobiographies, after which they paired up and wrote the biography of another student. Ms. Daugherty then modeled a biography for the class. Students now were ready to select a biography and become that person for their classmates. They selected such subjects as Grace Kelly, Maya Angelou, Clara Barton, and Cleopatra. After reading one or more biographies of the selected subject, each student chose what he or she felt were the most important facts, dressed in costume, and presented the character to classmates. The student who portrayed Albert Einstein got into character by even mussing up his hair, as he had read was typical of his subject. As a culminating activity, a children's literature class made up of pre-service teachers went to the Model Lab School for a performance. Both groups received great benefit from the program.

Helen Beesley of Windsor Elementary School in Windsor, Maine, applied an activity that she had been using in a history unit to biography. Thinking about the subject of their biography, students choose three to five items that help explain who that person is. It might be something important to the person or something he or she might wear. Beesley suggests that students be given instructions about the type of information wanted as well as a rubric that tells what is expected in their presentation. She gives, as an example, some items brought for the character Anne Frank, including a Star of David and a diary.

Poetry writing can be successfully combined with biography to produce an interesting activity. Heather Schacher of British Columbia finds the "Getting to Know You" poem a successful activity to use with biography. This poem has a set format:

"Getting to Know You Poem"

Line 1: First name

Line 2: 4 Descriptive words

Line 3: Relationship to (sister, brother, mother, uncle, etc.)

Line 4: Lover of (three things)

Line 5: Who feels (three feelings) ...when ...

Line 6: Who fears (three things)

Line 7: Who would like to (three things)

Line 8: Resident of (location)

Line 9: Last name (Bafile 2001)

Such a poem about Mary Church Terrell, African American leader for racial equality, might look like this:

Mary

Privileged, beautiful, top of her class, born free

Wife of Robert

Lover of equality, freedom, fairness

Who felt Anger when people were treated unjustly,

Happy when African Americans were given their rights, Happy when schools were integrated

Who feared segregation, African American children not being educated, poor schools for African American children

Who liked to work hard for causes she believed in, to see change for the benefit of her people, to work for people's rights

Resident of Tennessee; Washington, DC; and Maryland

Terrell

Can biography be made exciting and alive for children? The library media specialists and teachers I have talked about would give a resounding "Yes!" Let Chandler's testimony of her biography book report project speak for itself. "This is the best thing I have ever done with biographies. My biggest problem is in being able to direct their attention to another genre. They want to read every biography in the library!" (Bafile 2001).

Resources:

Books and Articles

Bafile, Cara. "Monologues, Poems, and Time Lines—Biography Lessons Made Easy!" *Education World: The Educator's Best Friend* (2001). Available online: http://www.education-world.com/a_curr/curr230.shtml

Freedman, Russell. "Bring 'em Back Alive: Writing History and Biography for Young People." *School Library Journal* 40 (March 1994): 138-141.

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Hillman, Judith. *Discovering Children's Literature*. 2nd ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill, 1999.

McKissack, Patricia, and Frederick McKissack. *Mary Church Terrell: Leader for Equality*. Rev.ed. Berkeley Heights, NJ: Enslow, 2002.

Norton, Donna E. *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Children's Literature*. 5th ed. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merril, 1999.

Websites

Biography - People Who Have Made a Change in Our Lives. <http://www.campbellusd.k12.ca.us/OnlineAct/biog.html>

The George Washington Biography Lesson. <http://www.mountvernon.org/education/biography/>