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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
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 (Bafille 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!" (Bafille 2001)

Resources:

Books and Articles

Websites