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Biography for Children Has Never Been Better

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After reading Russell Freedman’s *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (1990), one student remarked enthusiastically, “When I read this book I felt like I was reading about a close friend or relative. He came to life right on the page!” Such a response is not uncommon in classrooms where students read and study biography. Breathing life into subjects is the goal of biographers.

In the past few years, many literacy experts and readers have noted the improved quality of children’s literature, notably in nonfiction in general, and biography in particular. There are many reasons for the improvement in biographies for children and teens. Authors of biographies in earlier periods were part of a trend that glorified their subjects to present individuals worthy of emulation without sharing their foibles and shortcomings. Such writing is a form of stereotyping that alienates young readers from the subjects of biographies rather than helping them to know those subjects as real people (Tunnell & Jacobs, 2008). In addition, earlier nonfiction “was of mediocre quality. It was often characterized by inaccuracy, pedestrian writing, and minimal visual appeal” (Moss, 1995, p. 122). This certainly is not true about the best biography available for today’s children and teens.

Biography is often defined as “the life story of a person.” Yet authors present these life stories through a variety of approaches. Table 1 illustrates the types of biographies and some notable examples. For this issue of *Reading Horizons*, we share some of the best biographies that have recently passed our way. Please note that the grade level designations are “loose” suggestions. For example, Claire Nivola’s (2008) *Planting the Trees of Kenya* can be read aloud to emergent readers or form the centerpiece of a unit on social action for upper elementary students. Likewise, a teacher might lead upper elementary students to see different points of view about the Lincolns’ sons when reading Candace Fleming’s (2008) *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary* while middle school students might enjoy reading the book independently. Some might also enjoy comparing and contrasting Fleming’s take on the Lincolns with Nikki Giovanni’s (2008) *Lincoln and Douglass: An American Friendship*.
Freed by the Emancipation Proclamation, over the course of her life, Mississippi-born Ida B. Wells went from powerless slave to crusading opinion-maker, often signing her published pieces “Yours for justice.” This picture book follows Ida as she embraces education as a means to success, faces the challenges of keeping her family together after her parents’ death, and postpones marriage for her career. A teacher and a writer, she harnesses the power of the printed word to reveal the truth about the lynchings used to terrorize blacks and their sympathizers during the late nineteenth century. The book’s back matter offers additional insights into Ida’s involvement in the fight for women’s suffrage, and a timeline of important events in her life will prompt readers to seek out more information on this woman who constantly put her life on the line for the cause of justice. Some may even find their own causes worth defending after reading about this historic crusader for justice.


President Theodore Roosevelt had all sorts of challenging adventures during his lifetime, but the toughest problem he ever faced may have been reining in his spirited daughter, Alice. Independent-minded, Alice lived life on her own terms, savoring every opportunity that came her way. This delicious book celebrates the unique personality and winsome ways of the girl who became the woman who captivated the press with her lively actions. The illustrations portray a charming Alice who will sprint her way into the hearts of today’s admiring readers and remind them to be a little less
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Wangari Maathai left her beautiful Kenya to attend college in the United States. Upon her return home she discovered a very different place from what she left. Her homeland had suffered under the toll of unwise land management practices on the ecosystem. Still, Wangari, who won the Nobel Peace Prize for her efforts, refused to give up as she knew that individuals could make a big change. “Think of what we ourselves are doing,” she urged the women of Kenya. “We are cutting down the trees of Kenya. When we see that we are part of the problem, we can become part of the solution.” Her solution was to plant trees, many started from the seeds of the remaining trees in the country. Eventually the efforts of Wangari and her dedicated followers led to the Green Belt Movement, and the millions of trees they planted changed Kenya’s countryside forever. Nivola’s rich writing complements her glorious watercolors, capturing both the devastation of deforestation and the effects of the newly planted trees on Kenya’s landscape.


Illustrated by Rebecca Gibbon.


While today’s children today may not be familiar with the pressure of gender expectations, Elizabeth Cady Stanton was. Rather than sitting by silently while being told her voice didn’t matter, this nineteenth century feminist
fought back and spoke out for women’s suffrage, realizing that with the vote came
the voice. Although the Nineteenth Amendment guaranteeing women the right
to vote wasn’t passed until eighteen years after her death, Stanton inspired others
to fight “the thorns of bigotry and prejudice” on many levels. The colored pencil
and gouache cartoonish illustrations in this picture book depict an outspoken
Elizabeth, breaking free of society’s restraints.


Carole Boston Weatherford’s words dance alongside Sean Quall’s evocative acrylic, collage, and pencil illustrations to demonstrate how the sounds and experiences of his childhood led John Coltrane to become one of the greatest jazz musicians of all time. The repeated line, “Before John was a jazz giant” makes the text easy for young children to read. The rhythm and style of the text infuse readers with enthusiasm. For example, “he heard big bands on the radio/ and a saxophone’s soulful solo,/ blues notes crooning his name.”

Grades 3-5


Filled with archival photographs and thoroughly researched, this account of the life, times, and challenges of Laura Bridgman, who became famous at the age of twelve, will intrigue readers who enjoyed George Sullivan’s Helen Keller: Her Life in Pictures (2007). Scarlet fever left five-year-old Laura blind, deaf, and unable to communicate. Although, over time, she and her parents managed to develop a rudimentary communication system, Laura craved more stimulation than her parents could provide.
When Samuel Gridley Howe brought her to the Perkins Institution in Boston in 1837, she found the words that opened the world to her. As Howe tried to raise awareness about the capacities of the blind individuals in his charge, Laura became famous for her reading of relief maps and a huge globe. Much more than just a stage performer, Laura was curious, interested in spiritual matters and deeply attached to Dr. Howe. The author’s afterword explores the advances in technology, medicine, and attitudes toward the blind, and encourages readers to ponder Laura’s life had she been born today.


Tonya Bolden’s lively writing traces the life of George Washington Carver from slave, to orphan, to college student, and to the distinguished educator and scientist he later became. A teacher of better ways of farming, Carver’s profound reverence for the earth influenced many people in the South as he invented sensible and life-saving products that could be made from peanuts and sweet potatoes. Photographs and historical artifacts, including Carver’s own drawings and paintings, add a great deal to this portrayal of his life and many accomplishments. Readers will draw inspiration from Carver’s multifaceted life as a dedicated student, pioneering conservationist, innovative scientist, and impassioned educator.


This wonderful biography about one of the architects of the 1963 March on Washington is an example of the power of one individual to make a difference in the world. Born in West Chester, Pennsylvania in 1912, young Rustin grew up hearing stories about racism and intolerance, and he never forgot the lessons about nonviolence that he learned from his family. Living a purpose-filled life meant
that Rustin would become deeply involved in the Civil Rights Movement, often being arrested for civil disobedience and for following his convictions. Photographs, songs, and the music of the period fill the pages of this inspiring account of the man behind the headlines. Rustin’s example will encourage young readers to take a stand on issues that matter to them.


Keeping a watch for one guest in particular, President Abraham Lincoln celebrates his second inauguration in 1865. Staunch abolitionists, he and his friend Frederick Douglass reflect on their parallel journeys to this point in time as the festivities move around them. Giovanni’s elegant prose celebrates a unique friendship, forged during the nation’s darkest days. Coupled with Collier’s intriguing cut-paper collages, this picture book is certain to enliven any pedantic treatment of Lincoln, Douglass, and John Brown’s raid on Harper’s Ferry, which provoked the war between the North and the South.


Abraham Lincoln was born and raised in the harsh backwoods country of Kentucky and Indiana. His mother lovingly shared the Bible stories she had learned from her own mother with her children. While her death made darkness seem to fill their cabin and their lives, his father’s subsequent marriage to Sally Johnston brought order and books to the Lincoln home. Her confidence in young Abraham Lincoln helped him to grow, learn to read, and stand tall. Readers will enjoy this friendly look at Lincoln’s childhood and how far his promise and abilities “would take him...or what it would mean to both him and his country.”
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In determined statements, the author tells the story of Matthew Henson who went from cabin boy to trusted advisor of Admiral Peary in his assault on the North Pole. The text and illustrations show the pivotal role this brave man played in the expedition, even carrying Peary back to base when his toes froze, learning the Inuit language, sticking by Peary for twenty years, and refusing to give up on his dream. The author’s note poignantly reminds readers that Peary neglected to credit Henson for his role in helping Peary reach the North Pole. It took almost a century before Henson’s essential contributions to the expedition were widely recognized.

Grades 6-8


Using short pieces of text chockfull of quotes and visual images such as photographs, engravings, and cartoons, Candace Fleming’s scrapbook approach effectively brings Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln and their sons to life. Moreover, the author weaves facts and traditions of the time period in which they lived to provide readers with a context for their lives. Readers learn many details of others whose lives intersected with the Lincolns. This collective biography provides details of Abraham and Mary’s childhoods, their courtship, political lives, the presidency, the war years, their sons’ wild behavior, the heartrending deaths of three of their children, and finally their own tragic deaths. Fleming even provides Lincoln’s favorite cake recipe for readers to bake and experience for themselves.

In 1940, an unassuming American journalist set out on a mission that changed his life forever and led to the rescue of over 2,000 people. Many Jewish artists and intellectuals had fled their homelands for France, a country that generously welcomed and protected the refugees. With the German occupation, many of these refugees headed for Marseilles in hopes of escaping “certain death at the hands of the Nazis.” Repeatedly putting his own life in danger, Varian Fry defied Hitler, the Nazis, and the Vichy Government. Fry’s efforts brought high adventure and profound hope to a time of grim history. As the author notes, “Varian Fry knew it was impossible to rescue every Jew in Europe. But he knew it was possible to rescue some. And he did” (p. 167).

**Grades 9-12**


Never content to endure inequities quietly or shun controversy, William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, the first black man to receive a doctorate from Harvard University and the writer who coined the idea of the “Talented Tenth” for those black men and women with special attributes, was a charming, articulate man who fought for the rights of others until his death at 95, on the eve of the March on Washington. Bolden provides intriguing historical details that revive the years during which this American intellectual wrote, spoke, and influenced others. Snippets about his personal life prompt readers to wonder about the generosity of spirit of a man who spent so much time working for others but so little time caring for his own family. A founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, whose 100th anniversary occurs in 2009, and the founding editor of *The*
Crisis magazine, Du Bois traveled the globe, intrigued by the world around him, and intent on improving the lot of blacks worldwide. Tidbits such as Du Bois and his wife’s first Christmas pact to spend only five dollars each on the holiday in order to stick to their budget humanize a man whose influence stretches across the decades. Bolden’s deft handling of a complicated individual leaves readers fascinated but puzzled by Du Bois.


While the classic book *To Kill a Mockingbird* is often assigned summer reading for many junior high and high school students, readers will be interested in learning more about the woman behind this classic. This adaptation of Shield’s best-selling adult biography of author Harper Lee, offers insight into the writer as a girl growing up in Monroeville, Alabama, from where she drew literary inspiration, her friendship with Truman Capote, and her struggles as a budding writer in New York City. The author interviewed Lee’s friends, neighbors, and classmates to craft an intriguing account of an independent, fascinating woman who never wrote another book after *Mockingbird.*
Table 1. Types of Biographies

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<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Notable Examples</th>
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<tr>
<td>Picture Book Biography</td>
<td>• Pictures may carry a substantial part of the story&lt;br&gt;• May be authentic or fictionalized&lt;br&gt;• May be complete or partial</td>
<td>• Martin’s Big Words by Doreen Rappaport&lt;br&gt;• A Picture Book of John Hancock by David &amp; Michael Adler&lt;br&gt;• Michelangelo by Diane Stanley&lt;br&gt;• Gregor Mendel by Cheryl Bardoe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simplified Biography</td>
<td>• Written in simple language&lt;br&gt;• Usually short&lt;br&gt;• Has many illustrations&lt;br&gt;• Maybe written in brief chapters</td>
<td>• Jessie Owens by Carole Boston Weatherford&lt;br&gt;• The Secret World of Hildegard by Jonah Winter&lt;br&gt;• The Boy on Fairfield Street by Kathleen Krull</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partial Biography</td>
<td>• Only part of the subject’s life&lt;br&gt;• May be only an episode or a day of selected events from the whole life</td>
<td>• Phillis's Big Test by Catherine Clinton&lt;br&gt;• Rosa by Nikki Giovanni&lt;br&gt;• The Snow Baby by Katherine Kirkpatrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complete Biography</td>
<td>• Spans lifetime&lt;br&gt;• Most common type of biography</td>
<td>• Up Close: Johnny Cash by Anne E. Neimark&lt;br&gt;• MLK: Journey of a King by Tonya Bolden&lt;br&gt;• Something Out of Nothing: Marie Curie and Radium by Carla Killough McClafferty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Biography</td>
<td>• Contains brief selections about several subjects&lt;br&gt;• May range from one-paragraph sketches to long essays&lt;br&gt;• Often selected by theme</td>
<td>• Hitler Youth by Susan Campbell Bartoletti&lt;br&gt;• Wildly Romantic by Catherine M. Andronik.&lt;br&gt;• On My Block: Stories and Paintings by 15 Artists by Dana Goldberg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Autobiography and Memoir</td>
<td>• Written by subjects themselves&lt;br&gt;• Subjective&lt;br&gt;• May also fit into other categories</td>
<td>• Before It Wriggles Away by Janet Wong&lt;br&gt;• Miss American Pie by Margaret Sartor&lt;br&gt;• Tasting the Sky by Ibtisam Barakat</td>
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Adapted from Kiefer, Hepler, & Hickman, 2007
References


**About the Authors:**

Terrell A. Young and Barbara A. Ward are on the faculty at Washington State University. Young is currently on the NCTE Orbis Pictus Committee, and Ward serves as chair of the IRA Notable Books for a Global Society Committees.