

From Spark to Story

One writer's take on the joys and challenges of picture-book biographies

By Tanya Lee Stone -- *School Library Journal*, 11/1/2007

The biography. It is a form that takes many shapes as writers seek to translate the lives of people who fascinate them into something tangible, something they can hold in their hands. Biographies can be thematic, chronological, collective, exhaustive, or sparse. Some are visual—photo biographies, graphic-novel biographies, and picture-book biographies. It is the latter that intrigue me most, as this form strives to capture that which is least tangible—the essence of an individual's life. But that essence can be elusive. So when writing a picture-book biography, I ask myself two questions. How can I show the moment, or pivotal event, or unique characteristic that best illuminates who a person truly is? How can I best strike a chord that will excite young readers and inspire them to want to go out and learn more about the subject?

One of the things I love about the picture-book biography form is that it allows writers to break free from the more standard structure of telling a person's life story from beginning to end. Of course, some picture-book biographers do so brilliantly. Consider Peter Sis's biography of Galileo, *Starry Messenger* (Farrar, 1996), James Cross Giblin's wonderful books about Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and Benjamin Franklin (all of which use a longer, 48-page format), and much of Diane Stanley's work.

But most of my favorite picture-book biographies do not focus on a whole life. Shana Corey's *You Forgot Your Skirt, Amelia Bloomer!* (2000); Chris Raschka's *Charlie Parker Played Be Bop* (1997, both Scholastic), which I can only sing, it embodies Parker's groove so well; Doreen Rappaport's *Martin's Big Words* (Hyperion, 2001); and Nikki Giovanni's *Rosa* (Holt, 2005) all do this with stellar style.

Sometimes, dramatization is employed to bring us closer to a subject. Two of my all-time favorites, Alan Schroeder's *Minty* (Dial, 1996) and Pam Muñoz Ryan's *Amelia and Eleanor Go for a Ride* (Scholastic, 1999) contain fictionalized story elements based on research (Amelia and Eleanor did go for a ride, but they were passengers). Nevertheless, the mental images Schroeder created of a young Harriet Tubman's spirit add a glorious and new dimension to our long-held notions of Tubman, instilling a desire in readers to learn more about her. Ryan's book also does its job beautifully, leaving a lasting and true impression of two strong, courageous women. Every one of these picture-book biographies delivers what I want from the form—to discover something new and be moved to find out more.

Hitting the mark just right is not unlike making a good reduction sauce, a demi-glace. Like literary chefs, picture-book biographers use intense flavors, simmering long and slow, straining out the elements that have infused the base, then further reducing what remains to achieve a rich, silky essence.

I can only hope I achieved this with some success in my forthcoming *Elizabeth Leads the Way* (Holt, Spring, 2008). Although Elizabeth Cady Stanton had a long and glorious life filled with stunning achievements, I knew my story would only work if I focused on what it was about her that mattered most to me. After all, there were already plenty of biographies about her, and even a few picture books, so why one more? What would make mine different enough to justify another book about her, and more importantly, why did I feel the need to add my voice to that body of work? That took me some time to figure out, and—not surprisingly—there was a direct link between my doing so and successfully placing the manuscript.

Even after I had the meat of the story, something was missing. But what? I thought back to what prompted me to write this story in the first place. Part of it was that many of my grown female friends did not know who Stanton was. Shocking! As the educated and forward-thinking women I knew them to be, how could they not know who was responsible for spearheading the women's suffrage movement? The other, larger part was the realization that most young girls today do not have firsthand experience with gender discrimination. They don't necessarily know what it feels like to be told "you can't do that" based on their sex. So I could not count on a built-in response of indignation. That's what was lacking. How could I have missed that?

I had momentarily forgotten that my intimacy with the concept of women's rights and that of young readers was vastly different. But one thing I've learned about my process is that I have a tendency to jump right into the heavy lifting before circling back to the initial spark. This makes sense, because my personal connection to the material is already solidly in place—why else would I choose to write about it? But a young reader's is not, and it is my job to make that connection for them. I need to get them as riled up and excited as I am.

I figured out just how to ruffle my readers' feathers while watching *Iron Jawed Angels*, a movie about famous suffragette Alice Paul. I felt the anger anew; the injustice. That's what I wanted kids to understand. I leapt off the couch and ran to the computer. Not wanting to waste time searching for the now-old file, I opened a blank document and typed, "What would you do/If someone told you/You can't be what you want to be/because you are a girl? What would you do/If someone told you/Your voice doesn't count/Your vote doesn't matter/because you are a girl? Would you ask why? Would you talk back? Would you fight for your rights?"

With that new beginning, the rest of the book fell into place. I had now answered one of my initial questions—why tell this story as a picture-book biography? The answer: To open a window into Stanton's life and let kids peek inside. I wanted them to get what all the fuss was about. I wanted them to be inspired to seek out more. Isn't that what a picture-book biography is for? To capture the essential fiber of a person, excite the imagination of children, make them want to add to the context you offer and help them create a larger picture of the world.

This is what Jane Yolen did with *My Brothers' Flying Machine* (Little, Brown, 2003). Many books have been written about the Wright brothers and their famous flight at

Kitty Hawk. But Yolen's interest was in looking at the story from a different angle. By sharing how integral Katharine Wright was to her brothers' lives, Yolen was able to add a new dimension of family life at the Wright house to an old story. And Gene Barretta succeeded at putting a fresh face on Benjamin Franklin with his inventive *Now & Ben* (Holt, 2006), focusing on the connection between Franklin and our many modern-day conveniences.

Picture-book biographies also offer a welcome form for introducing topics that may be either obscure to kids or difficult to access. Jeannine Atkins's *Mary Anning and the Sea Dragon* (Farrar, 1999) is a wonderful true tale of a young female fossilist, credited with the discovery of certain dinosaur fossils at the ripe old age of 11. Ellie Crowe's *Surfer of the Century* (Lee & Low, 2007) also brings a little-known figure into focus with the story of Duke Kahanamoku, a six-time Olympic swimming champion who helped make surfing the sensation it is today.

That an author chooses this form is immediately a clue to his or her intent. M. T. Anderson likely could have written a full-length biography of Handel, but I infer from his choice to write a picture book that perhaps his goal was to draw kids into the world of classical music with *Handel, Who Knew What He Liked* (Candlewick, 2001), as well as with *Strange Mr. Satie* (Viking, 2003).

Likewise, with my forthcoming *Sandy's Circus* (Viking, Fall, 2008), I wanted to draw kids into the world of Alexander Calder's art. I wanted to give kids a taste of both his art and personality, in hopes that they will get jazzed, expose themselves to more of his work, and make their own connections to it. In order to do that, I needed to carefully choose my way in to such a big, bold life. *Sandy's Circus* portrays the time in which this inventor of the mobile found his artistic voice—and when the world recognized him for the wunderkind he was. That wonderful, wacky time in the 1920s when he made a lion, then a lion tamer, and so on and so on, until he was on hands and knees performing his magical, movable Cirque de Calder to the acclaim of the art world.

Another reason to write a picture-book biography is, well, the pictures. For me, the illustrations are the big payoff; the reward for all that hard work. That joyous day when a package arrives and in it you find...the sketches! There's nothing like the thrill of discovering the new layers and dimensions an artist has brought to your story. When I saw the sketches Boris Kulikov did for *Sandy's Circus*, I was nearly speechless. I could not have imagined a better result—and they were only sketches. The artist had yet to render final art, but he had already brought everything I found fascinating and joyous about Alexander Calder and his whimsical style to the pages of our book. I knew that kids would take one look and want to get their hands on more information about this important artist (and I don't just mean Calder). In the end, what I love about the picture-book biography is how it allows me to translate into book form that giddy feeling I get when I ask a child, "Have you ever heard of so-and-so? No? Well then, let me tell you a story...."

Author Information

Tanya Lee Stone writes fiction and nonfiction for children and young adults. To learn more about her work, visit www.tanyastone.com.