Biography: Telling History's Great Stories

Brandon M. Miller

I loved reading biographies as a kid. I shared Crazy Horse's warrior vision. I hoped against hope that Joan of Arc would escape the flames. I trudged through snow at Valley Forge with the young Marquis de Lafayette.

For me, biographies lent history a face. Fiction had nothing on history for tales of courage, sacrifice, redemption, cruelty, or betrayal. Through biographies I explored the world, all the time wondering—could I be so brave, could I have faced this struggle, could I do anything so wicked as the people who marched across my pages?

Biographies for young people have changed since I grew up. Topics are more inclusive than in the past. Today's books usually shun "made up" dialog and scenes. Maps, timelines, and numerous illustrations provide deeper insights. Many books offer source notes, bibliographies, authors notes, and further reading lists. It is a glorious time to write history and biography for young people.

Months, maybe years before the writing begins, a biographer sifts through piles of books and articles seeking the story, a story based on fact. Primary sources, materials actually written or used during the time period the biographer is writing about, are a must for today's children's writer. I love unleashing my inner snoop to devour personal letters, private diaries and journals, and period newspapers. I also love using non-written materials such as photographs and paintings, tools, maps, clothing, and period music. For *Good Women of a Well-Blessed Land*, I laced into a replica of an eighteenth century corset (or stays). Each tug of the strings took me back in time—it changed how I stood, sat, moved, and breathed.

A biographer dealing with a culture or era that left few, if any, written records must seek further sources—archaeologists, botanists, anthropologists, historians of oral traditions, and art historians. Visiting art museums, historic sites, living history museums, and anything associated with the subject or their time proves invaluable.

Good biographies offer a sense of time and place. While people of the past shared the same raw emotions we experience—jealousy, love, ambition—the societies they lived in were very different from our reader's experience. History is a distant land with distinct sounds, sights, and sensibilities. Writers must place events in context with background information to set the stage and offer period perspectives.

This is especially hard when writing biographies for younger readers who have little prior knowledge of history and a limited vocabulary. Most biographies for younger readers present only a slice of a person's life that sheds light on their accomplishments.

My favorite part about writing history is letting people of the past, whenever possible, speak for themselves. Their words convey emotion and immediacy, helping readers discover the humanity in history; who was this person and what did they think or feel?

For my fall 2009 book on Benjamin Franklin, I found that while minister to France during the American Revolution, Franklin butted heads with fellow commissioner Arthur Lee. Finally fed up with Lee's backstabbing, Franklin vented his feelings in a letter he never sent. Picture him hunched over his paper scratching furiously with his quill pen. "I am old, cannot have long to live, have much to do and no time for Altercation" (259). He has borne Lee's snubs and rebukes, says Franklin, out of respect for the mission and his pity for Lee's "Sick Mind, which is forever tormenting itself, with its Jealousies, Suspicions & Fancies that others mean you ill, wrong you, or fail in Respect for you.—If you do not cure yourself of this Temper it will end in Insanity…" (Franklin 260). I could never have summed up Franklin's feelings, still gentlemanly even in anger, so well as the man himself.

But biographers can't simply list a long string of quotes. Instead, primary materials provide details to illuminate the story. In *George Washington for Kids, His Life and Times*, I wrote about twenty-two-year-old Washington's first battle, a short skirmish that helped spark the French and Indian War. Luckily, I had Washington's own words describing May 27, 1754.

> "I left a guard there to defend it [his camp], and with the rest of my men began to march through a heavy rain, with the night as black as pitch and by a path scarcely wide enough for a man. We were often astray for 15 or 20 minutes before we could find the path again, and often we would jostle each other without being able to see. We continued our march all night long, and about sunrise we arrived at the camp of the Indians, where, after holding council with the Half King, we decided to strike jointly." (George Washington's Journal for 1754 13).

Taking Washington's cues, I wrote:

> The rain pounded down, the night black as pitch. Through darkness the Virginia militia soldiers struggled to find a path. They crashed through trees, lost their way, stumbled into one another in the Pennsylvania wilderness. At daybreak they reached the camp of Native American leader Half King and his warriors. Half King and the militia leader, a newly appointed lieutenant colonel at age 22, agreed to strike an encampment of French soldiers in a ravine a few miles away.

I don't believe in making up dialogue or placing real people in fictional scenes. That is best left to historical fiction but not in biography. Sometimes no one knows what really

happened. I try to offer some ideas of what historians think *might* have happened and leave the rest to the mystery of history.

Offering the shadow and light of human nature, biographies allow even reluctant readers access to history. At their best, biographies inspire readers with stories of people who have struggled, overcome great odds, and made a contribution to our human spirit.

Works Cited

Kent, Donald H. Editor. *George Washington's Journal for 1754*. First published in *Pennsylvania History*, January 1952. Reprinted by Eastern National for the National Park Service, 2004.

Franklin, Benjamin. *Autobiography, Poor Richard, and Later Writings.* Notes and selections by J. A. Leo Lemay. New York, New York: Literary Classics of the United States. 1997.

Miller, Brandon Marie. *George Washington for Kids, His Life and Times*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2007.

---. *Good Women of a Well-Blessed Land, Women's Lives in Colonial America.* Minneapolis: Lerner Publishing, 2003.

About the Author

Brandon Marie Miller writes award-winning history books for young people. The International Reading Association, the National Council of the Social Studies, the New York Public Library, and the Junior Library Guild, among others has honored her books. She earned her degree in American History from Purdue University. Visit her Web site at www.brandonmariemiller.com.