

A Note from the Editors: Coming of Age Through Biography

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Welcome to our fourth issue, an issue focusing on biography and autobiography for children and young adults. In what follows, we include “first opinions” about and “second reactions” to many fascinating portraits of famous and infamous women and men, including Phillis Wheatley, George Washington Carver, Roy Lichtenstein, Varian Fry, and Benedict Arnold. The biographies and autobiographies reviewed in this issue will be of interest to pre-school through secondary school readers, as many of the “second reactions” demonstrate through descriptions of classroom practice and the responses of real students.

In many of the reviews that follow, as well as in the “think pieces” by practicing authors and literary scholars, the reviewers state that they were not always readers of biography and autobiography as young people. However, when they did read the genre, they were often inspired and surprised by what they learned. The stories that unfolded allowed them to explore other places and times, learn historical details that weren’t always shared in school, and live vicariously the thrilling, yet often challenging, lives of those who have since become cultural icons.

What is it about biography and autobiography that appeals to young readers? Researchers, such as Michael W. Smith and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm in *“Reading Don’t Fix No Chevys”: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men* (2002), have argued that more boys than girls enjoy reading nonfiction. However, nonfiction in general tends to get short shrift among children and adolescents who often opt for fictional fantasy or adventure stories over real-life accounts. So why do biographies and autobiographies retain a particular popularity? Perhaps this consistent interest (and hence the regular publication of biography/autobiography by children’s literature presses) has something to do with the universal experience of “coming of age.” Many children’s and young adult books, of course, address the “coming of age” theme, as youthful protagonists find ways to address conflict, meet challenges, and grow as maturing individuals. However, the coming of age story does not have to appear only in the pages of a novel. In fact, it is particularly powerful when reading a narrative to know that the protagonist was *real* and the events described *really happened*. This sense of veracity might be even more important for the young reader who is in the process of developing an identity through role experimentation and is looking for models to emulate. Whether telling the story of the first woman candidate for president, the struggles of African American poet Phillis Wheatley to be accepted as an artist, the intellectual achievements of George Washington Carver, or Lang Lang’s struggle to become a musician, these books provide real-life stories of struggle, persistence, and growth. Eighteen-year-old Phillis Wheatley was still a teenager when she endured the

“test” of her poetry by the white men of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. She passed their test and emerged from it a more confident, self-possessed young woman, who was also publically deemed a successful poet.

All of the books reviewed in this issue are, in many ways, coming-of-age narratives, no matter what the age of the subject. Because of their focus on this universal theme, a theme especially powerful for young readers, biography and autobiography continue to be popular genres. So with no further commentary, I invite you to browse this issue, and if you feel so compelled, seek out the books themselves to learn more about the amazing individuals whose lives unfold on their pages.

Work Cited

Smith, Michael W and Jeffrey D. Wilhelm. *"Reading Don't Fix No Chevys": Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.