

## Questioning Biography

*Eve Tal*

I must confess that I don't read biographies for pleasure, although this was not always true. Except for picture book biographies, they are my least-favorite genre of children's literature. Knowing next to nothing about them, I decided to do a little research.

I began with the vague idea that biographies constitute a large proportion of the non-fiction published for children, but how much? To answer this question, I looked at the Orbis Pictus<sup>1</sup> award winners from 1990-2009, including the recommended books, and broke them into four rough categories: biography, nature/science, history, and other. I found that biographies constituted 33% of the total, nature/science 29%, history 27%, and other 11%.

The next question that came to mind was the choice of subjects. A glance through Amazon.com after searching specific names with the selection criteria "hardcover books for ages 9-12 published since 1990" uncovered some forty biographies of Abraham Lincoln, thirty-seven of George Washington, twenty-eight of Martin Luther King, fifteen of Eleanor Roosevelt, and thirteen of John F. Kennedy. There were six biographies of Adolf Hitler and only one of Mao Ze Dong, raising the question "do children really need still another biography of Abraham Lincoln?"<sup>2</sup>

This led me to wonder how writers choose the subject of their biographies. Since I have been working on and off on a biography of the folklorist Joseph Jacobs (1854-1916) for several years, it seemed appropriate to examine my own motivation. I first heard of Jacobs while studying folktales, and his Jewish-sounding name intrigued me. What, I wondered, was a Jew doing collecting British and Celtic folktales in Victorian England? Out of curiosity, I followed the threads of this almost-forgotten life until, after a few years, my search petered out. I was unable to discover a single full-length biography, the collected papers, or any living relatives of this once well-known scholar and writer. Lacking enough information for the middle grade biography I had planned to write, I completed a picture book manuscript. Curiosity and a sense of shared Jewish identity fired my quest.

Digging into other writers' motivation, I discovered Julia Mickenberg's fascinating article "Civil Rights, History, and the Left: Inventing the Juvenile Black Biography." According to Mickenberg, several biographical series were inaugurated in the 1940s and 1950s in response to a demand from the educational marketplace for supplemental history texts that could supply children with role models. Several of these series were edited by and included left-wing writers who were excluded by their political affiliations from writing textbooks. Mickenberg focuses on four women writers who wrote biographies of African Americans in order to show children:

a model of civic duty that hinged upon the need for brave, non-conforming individuals to struggle against injustice and to rally members of their communities to join in that struggle. Within these historical tales was an implicit or explicit commentary on the power of history and stories, and on education in general. This embedded commentary encouraged children to connect what they were reading to the world in which they currently lived; that is, to a social and political landscape dominated by Cold War repression and conformity on the one hand, and an increasingly militant struggle for African American civil rights on the other. (unpaged)

Lest we jump to the conclusion that these authors wrote propaganda, I should note that many of their biographies became classics and are still in print today, including: *Freedom Train: The Story of Harriet Tubman* by Dorothy Sterling and *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad* by Ann Petry.

With so many biographies for children available, I arrived at my ultimate question: What, besides intensive research and historical accuracy, makes for a good biography? Orbis Pictus committee member Elaine M. Aoki notes the importance of “significance” in the committee’s decision making process, writing that “[a] literary work becomes significant because the reader is able to make a timely connection to the text, fulfilling a need, which in turn leads to satisfaction” (42). “Significance,” she notes, “[...] can change with time and shifting social priorities. *An example of such a shift in social priorities is our thinking about the reality of African slavery and its complex far-reaching legacy*” (43 italics mine). Were the biographies of African Americans written decades previously a contributing factor to this shift? I would like to think so.

Once upon a time, I owned a shelf of Landmark<sup>3</sup> biographies given to me by well-meaning relatives. I sometimes reread them for pleasure. What did this inveterate fiction reader connect to in children’s biographies of Leonardo Da Vinci and Mary Queen of Scots, to name two that stand out in my mind?<sup>4</sup> It certainly wasn’t the role model factor. I was not artistic or scientific like Da Vinci and felt no ambition to grow up like Mary, who undertook a miserable quest to succeed to the throne of England and paid for her ambition with her life. Rather, I connected to the questions these books raised in my mind. I remember being astounded by Da Vinci’s inventions, which were centuries before their time. I read about Mary and tried to understand what drove her to desire a throne that couldn’t possibly make her happy and what kind of woman would make such choices.

These biographical lives shared nothing with the fiction I read as a child. The unclear motivation, ambiguous morality, and inevitable death of the main character raised more questions than they answered, real questions that simmer in my mind to this day.

## Notes

1. The Orbis Pictus Award for outstanding nonfiction for children has been given by the National Council of Teachers of English since 1990 to promote and recognize excellence in children's nonfiction. See <http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus> for lists of the award winners.
2. The Orbis Pictus Awards committee appears to steer away from American presidents, 2009 excepted. Only seven of the over one hundred winning biographies were of American presidents.
3. The Landmark series of biographies was one of those mentioned by Mickenberg in her article. Published by Random House, it was edited by Nancy Larrick who went on to write the groundbreaking 1965 *Saturday Review of Books* article "The All White World of Children's Books" and founded the International Reading Association.
4. Or perhaps it has something to do with the handiwork of the author herself? Emily Hahn was not a typical children's book author. I recently discovered Hahn while researching Shanghai in World War II. I was amazed to discover that the same Emily Hahn, the first woman to receive a degree in Mining Engineering from the University of Wisconsin (1926) and who also traveled across the U.S. disguised as a man, lived with a pygmy tribe in Africa, had an affair with a Chinese poet, and became addicted to opium in prewar Shanghai, was the author of two of my childhood favorites!

## Works Cited

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## About the Author

**Eve Tal** is an author living in Israel. Her prize-winning young adult novel *Double Crossing* was reviewed in the first issue of *First Opinions-Second Reactions*. The sequel, *Cursing Columbus*, will be published by Cinco Puntos Press in fall 2009. *A New Kid*, one of her Hebrew language picture books, was recently published by Milk and Honey Press in a bilingual edition. Eve holds an M.A. in children's literature and has published in children's literature journals, most recently in *International Research in Children's Literature*. Web site: <http://www.evetal.com>.