
Reading in the Content Areas: Fictionalized Biographies and Diaries for Social Studies

Author(s): Dee C. Storey

Source: *The Reading Teacher*, Vol. 35, No. 7 (Apr., 1982), pp. 796-798

Published by: Wiley on behalf of the International Reading Association

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20198101>

Accessed: 26-04-2016 11:54 UTC

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at

<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



International Reading Association, Wiley are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Reading Teacher*

Reading in the content areas: Fictionalized biographies and diaries for social studies

Guidelines for teaching children to read critically, judging the authenticity and accuracy of fictional biographies and diaries.

Dee C. Storey

As children grow, reading outside structured reading classes becomes increasingly important. Reading for reinforcement of skills changes gradually into reading to select information from the content areas.

At times there is a gap in children's ability to shift to this different type of reading. For instance, in social studies, students may be able to pick out facts (names, places, events), but they often overlook the deeper aspects of such information.

Literature, however, can be helpful in closing the gap. Fiction that is based on fact has the style children know well from their early reading

books, but it can be used to teach them the sorts of reading skills they need for content area reading.

Fictionalized biographies and diaries used in the social studies program provide a wealth of material that can be evaluated by students for its accuracy and authenticity. Children can distinguish fact from opinion, determine whether an author has any bias, and draw inferences about historical climates, settings, or events. Students can judge whether the author provided a true-to-life characterization of a historical individual or whether hero worship entered the picture. Students may be able to recall facts, but how much do they really know about the people who helped shape history? What kind of people become leaders? How and why does this happen?

Fictional presentations of biographies and diaries of real people, told

in first person narration, bring history to life on a more personal level than nonfiction material such as textbooks. Within the fictional stories, authors have taken liberties in inventing dialogue, emotions, and judgments of individuals to create a more intimate sounding account of someone's life. Readers should understand that such stories are not meant to replace factual material but are aimed at sparking interest in what is real and what can be substantiated. The fictional presentations merely serve as material that can go hand-in-hand with textbook information.

While children can check reference books for dates, places, and names, they should be on the outlook for other factors when reading fictional biographies and diaries of real people. Aspects to consider include the following six items.

1. *Accuracy and authenticity* are of prime concern even if the presentation is fictional.

2. *An author's foreword or postscript* often clues the reader about the fictional aspects of the story. In the foreword to *On the Frontier with Mr. Audubon* (1977), a fictional diary of John Audubon's assistant, author Barbara Brenner indicated that "although his journal is my creation, Joseph Mason himself was a real boy. I first learned about him from the legend under an Audubon painting at the New York Historical Society." F.N. Monjo, author of *The House on Stink Alley* (1977), a story about a Pilgrim lad who eventually traveled on the *Mayflower*, commented that "this is historical fiction for nothing is known of what young Love Brewster actually saw or heard or said in the house on Stink Alley—though he could have experienced everything related here, for all of the major facts are historically true."

3. *First person narrative* accounts create an air of "being there" with an individual. Readers may feel that the

narrator is talking directly to them. This feeling is not usually found in the third person narratives employed in nonfiction biographies. The differences in narrative style can be seen in the following two excerpts:

First person, fictional biography; Austin Dickinson "talks" about his sister. With Emily gone on a trip, the house on Pleasant Street seemed suddenly cheerless and empty. I could see that Father missed Emily too. He wrote to her often, telling her to be careful not to wet her feet or take cold, and warning her not to get lost. She brightened Father's life in a way that Vinnie and I never could. He sort of moped around, with her gone (Fisher and Rabe, 1965, p. 69).

Third person, authentic biography; the narrator describes author Edward Lear. He was an extremely delicate boy, suffering from bronchitis and asthma, and more seriously, from fits of epilepsy. . . . [The fits] made him hypersensitive and shy in the presence of strangers. . . . He never alluded to his epilepsy in his letters but in his private diaries he called it "The Deamon" or "The Terrible Deamon" (Lehmann, 1977, p. 11).

A first person narrative may be more intimate than third person, but care should be taken in explaining to students that such a portrayal is fictional. Students should also be cautioned that the person telling the story is acting as an observer and an interpreter of emotions and events.

4. *A limited perspective* is presented through first person narration because this narrator cannot be all places at once. Often he or she will repeat overheard conversations or opinions. In many instances the narrator is a child, and children do not always have access to adult conversations nor do they always realize the seriousness of the situations surrounding them; a child's point of view often contains an element of naivete as well. Elizabeth Powers, author of *The Journal of Madame Royale* (1976), wrote in personal correspondence (1980):

One of the most difficult things to keep in mind is, that no matter what happens, the whole picture must be seen from the viewpoint of the character writing the diary. Some things she [Marie Antoinette's daughter] could not see, they would have been outside her realm of existence—such as the deaths of her family—but they had to be brought into the story, insinuated so it would read smoothly, and not seem dragged in. Her horizon was limited.

5. *The author's bias* influences a reader's outlook about the personality being presented. The readers must decide whether the bias on an issue is held by the individual under study or by the author. When writing about Christopher Columbus via a fictional diary "penned" by his son, author Olga Litowinsky (1977, p. 147) pointed out, "the story of greed and corruption underlying *The High Voyage* should be noted, for it marked one more step along the road of brutal conquest that destroyed so many native American Peoples and cultures, a tragic loss for us all." While this fictional diary was based upon an actual journal, Litowinsky has stated her understanding of Columbus, and students must discover how realistic her position is.

6. *A bibliography of sources* used when writing the fictionalized biographies and diaries is often provided. Children could check the sources to determine if the author has included real letters, dialogue, or opinions. ■

At The University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Storey teaches graduate and undergraduate courses in literature for children and creative dramatics/storytelling.

References

- Brenner, Barbara. *On the Frontier with Mr. Audubon*. New York, N.Y.: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1977.
- Fisher, Aileen. *My Cousin Abe*. Nashville, Tenn.: Thomas Nelson, 1962.
- Fisher, Aileen, and Bernice Rabe. *We Alcotts*. New York, N.Y.: Atheneum, 1968.
- Fisher, Aileen, and Bernice Rabe. *We Dickinsons*. New York, N.Y.: Atheneum, 1965.
- Lawson, Robert. *Captain Kidd's Cat*. New York, N.Y.: Little, Brown, 1956.
- Lawson, Robert. *I Discover Columbus*. New York, N.Y.: Little, Brown, 1941.
- Lehmann, John. *Edward Lear and His World*. New York, N.Y.: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1977.
- Litowinsky, Olga. *The High Voyage*. New York, N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1977.
- Monjo, F.N. *The House on Stink Alley*. New York, N.Y.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977.
- Monjo, F.N. *Letters to Horseface*. New York, N.Y.: Viking Press, 1975.
- Monjo, F.N. *A Namesake for Nathan*. New York, N.Y.: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, 1977.
- Powers, Elizabeth. *The Journal of Madame Royale*. New York, N.Y.: Walker, 1976.
- Powers, Elizabeth. Personal correspondence, July 1, 1980, to July 15, 1980.

Spanish translation available from IRA

¿Enseñar a leer en preescolar?, a Spanish edition of IRA's publication, *The Kindergarten Child and Reading*, was published in 1981. In addition to an adapted translation of the original English text, the publisher, Narcea S.A. de Ediciones of Madrid, provided an extensive bibliography arranged under six different categories composed mainly of Spanish-language books available from Spanish and Latin American publishers. Initially this Spanish edition was available only through the publisher. IRA now has a limited supply of the book on hand for purchase through IRA Headquarters. The cost per copy for IRA members and nonmembers is US\$4.75. Orders should be addressed to Order Department, International Reading Association, 800 Barksdale Road, P.O. Box 8139, Newark, Delaware 19711, USA.