

Picture Book Biographies Reading Guide



Questions and Ideas for Consideration

Evaluate: How should children's nonfiction, and in particular, picture book biographies be evaluated? How do these books meet the criteria you believe important? What are their positive and problematic qualities?

Ideology: What ideologies do these books put forth? About gender? Children? Culture? Education? Social Justice? Achievement? Adult/Child relationships? Models of childhood?

Culture: In what ways do these biographies represent cultures in positive ways? What limitations do they have?

Illustrations and Rhetoric: How do the illustrations in these texts inform your understanding of them? What principles of visual design are present? What rhetorical strategies do authors employ?

History and Biography: What is the purpose of a biography, and how do these texts meet that purpose? How are these people and/or history represented in these texts?

Style: Compare style in this group of illustrated biographies. How do they utilize various techniques in similar and different ways, and how are they effective in their purpose or goal?

Favorite: Which of these biographies is your favorite? Why?

Daybook Possibilities

- Research the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), which dictate that early grades spend half of their reading time with informational text, and even more focus in later grades. What is your opinion on this?
- Find several more picture book biographies, perhaps including some you think are poor examples. Evaluate.
- Design a lesson plan using children's biographies, considering usefulness in language arts and other subjects, as well as a variety of age groups.
- Write a book proposal (a pitch for a publisher) for your own children's biography that you think addresses concerns you have with the nature of these texts.
- Paste your copies of illustrations from these biographies in your daybook. Comment on the use of visual style or technique, and note how this illustration contributes to the overall meaning of the text.
- Research young adult biographies. How do these texts work in similar and different ways than picture books?
- Map textual connections: similar themes, models of childhood, or ideologies. Develop an interpretation or thesis you could support using two or more texts, and list research questions to investigate it.

Background and Context

As more and more states adopt the Common Core standards, school districts and libraries are encouraged to incorporate more nonfiction and informational texts into curriculum and library programs. While there are a large number of picture book biographies available that could serve this purpose, the ways they present ideologies about gender and culture are sometimes problematic. As critical readers, it is important to consider such texts carefully.

Critical Resources

Thompson, Audrey. "Harriet Tubman in Pictures: Cultural Consciousness and the Art of Picture Books."

Stewart, Michelle Pagni. "Emerging Literacy of (an)other kind: Speakerly Children's Picture Books."

O'Neil, Kathleen. "Once Upon Today: Teaching for Social Justice with Postmodern Picturebooks."