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Biography: Beyond Role Models

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A children's biography of Benjamin Franklin written in 1898 has this sentence on the first page.

As wise as Solomon, as simple as Aesop, as witty as Mark Twain, as inventive as Edison, as gentle as a lamb, as bold as a lion, he tried his hand at everything and failed at nothing.

Trying to live up to a role model like that would discourage even the most dedicated and determined young person. Fortunately biographies written for children have changed since 1898. Famous people are presented in a more realistic way to show their sometimes ordinary beginnings and the problems they overcame in order to make a contribution to society. A biography of Franklin written in 1976 has this to say on the first page.

Luckily Milk Street (in Boston) had been named early, because that's where Benjamin Franklin was born. So right away he had an address. This was handy since he turned out to be famous and people like to know where and when famous men are born. (The day was January 17, 1706.) Of course, no one knew then that Benjamin Franklin would be famous. No one dreamed that some day he'd have streets named after him. And towns, too. And counties, colleges, libraries, hotels, banks, ships, stoves and stores. Even a football field would be named after him. And a flowering tree.

Readers can sense the excitement of what Benjamin Franklin, the son of a soap and candle maker, did to earn fame and honor. They can also realize that his accomplishments required a lot of hard work and struggle.

Many adults remember devouring biographies at about the ages of nine to eleven. Parents approved because the men and women read about were people of integrity, achievement and worthy models to emulate. The search for heroes may begin at eight or nine but people of all ages find it helpful to read about actual accomplishments--ones that inspire pride in the human family, develop historical understanding, and motivate one to try harder to live up to personal goals.
In 1985 there are children's biographies of people from almost every occupation and way of life—famous inventors, race car drivers, athletes, musicians of all kinds, people from all nations and cultures, poets, humorists, biologists—you name it—you can find it. There are single biographies and collections. There are, of course, great variations in the quality of their writing—some are excellent, some good, some average and some very poorly written. Superb biographies, because they make the person and his times come alive, because they are historically accurate and because they have central themes that make life a bigger climax than death, have a more powerful impact on the reader. How to select such dynamic biographies moves the study of biography beyond its use as a role model to biography as a means of learning both the labor and the excitement of research.

Using biography to teach a way of thinking involves comparison of more than one viewpoint, interpretative analysis and looking up original sources. For example, there are a number of excellent books written about the American revolution. Jean Fritz has written short biographies of John Hancock, Sam Adams, Patrick Henry, Ben Franklin, Paul Revere and King George III. All of these men had a part to play in America's fight for independence. Esther Forbes has written a popular historic fiction book about a young apprentice in Boston who becomes involved with the leaders of the American colonies. James and Christopher Collier raised objections to Forbes' Whig view of history. They said her view was simplistic, and in answer to it wrote My Brother Sam is Dead. It is narrated by a boy whose father is a Tory and whose brother joins the revolutionary forces only to be mistakenly accused and shot as a spy. One additional book by Jean Fritz called George Washington's Breakfast provides an amusing and interesting account of a boy who wants to know what George Washington ate for breakfast. (Incidentally he does find out from an authentic source, but you'll have to read the book to find out how he does it.) These books provide a basis for comparison, analysis and encouragement of curiosity which could motivate and show young people how to do research.

As one example of the possibilities, children's literature students in college were all asked to read Johnny Tremain, and then before class discussion to write a response to the question, "If Rab, the older boy idolized by Johnny Tremain, had been a Tory, what effect would it have had on Johnny Tremain?" One third of the class thought Johnny would have been loyal to the king and the whole story
would change. Three more noted what a lot of damage Rab would then have done to the revolutionary cause because he was such a keen observer. Several thought Rab would start a Young Loyalist organization. (They were about ready to rewrite history.)

A synopsis of the plot of My Brother Sam is Dead was then given, and a filmstrip shown giving excerpts from Fritz's five biographies of revolutionary war leaders (Paul Revere, John Hancock, Patrick Henry, Sam Adams, and Benjamin Franklin). Everyone had a copy of Can't You Make Them Behave, King George? so a list was made of his personality traits and the class agreed that he was a dedicated king who was trying to do what he thought was right. Finally, slides were shown of George Washington's Breakfast followed by the formulation of questions class members would investigate about King George III. (Naturally, top on the list was what he ate for breakfast, but another was what kind of an adult his daughter Augusta--who hated the weekly walks in the garden so the public could view them--became.)

A postscript to the session was the remarks by a Welsh student at BYU who expressed her appreciation for having opposing views of the war discussed together. She recalled that it was a terrible shock to take American history at BYU as a freshman and realize how biased many of the American and British history books are. She said the perspective was much clearer when both sides were portrayed. It was an eye opener for the instructor because in the past the reading of My Brother Sam had received hostile reactions from some students who love the straightforward simplicity of Johnny Tremain. Providing many viewpoints seemed to provide the knowledge that let them see and understand the complicated situation that many people found themselves part of during the revolutionary war. The many viewpoints presented, plus their hypothesizing about characters in the historic fiction books pushed them to rethink history--and to consider the viewpoints of those who record it. On a younger age level the reading and discussion would take more time, and additional activities could be planned, but similar results could be achieved.

There are groups of books about many important historical events--the Civil War with Andre Norton's Ride Proud, Rebel, Hunt's Across Five Aprils, Jean Fritz's Stonewall, Sandburg's Abe Lincoln Grows Up and Keith's Rifles for Watie, to name a few. Describing medieval times, Polly Brooks has written a biography of Eleanor of Aquitaine which makes a good companion to E. L. Konigsburg's amusing fictional biography of Eleanor called A Proud Taste for Scarlet and