1987

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What's New in Biography, Jean Fritz?

Lillian Heil

In my ideal world, children would be interested in biography, would regard famous people as friends and personal acquaintances, would understand their places in history and be imbued with the desire to do historical research themselves. But young people in our schools don't seem to be responding to history according to my dream plan; in fact, in the recent book What Do Our Seventeen-Year-Olds Know? the authors, Diane Ravitch and Chester Finn, Jr., have documented students' poor grasp of historical events and figures — and this lack of knowledge is at the end of their ten years of public school instruction. I don't propose to change that picture overnight, but I would like to introduce a children's author who writes biographies and history books in a way that sparks the interest of children, enables them to see important people and events as real, gives them a perspective of the events and people that fit together to make history, and intrigues them to become researchers themselves.

This author is Jean Fritz, and her books can give children as young as second or third grade an introduction to the fascinating world of the past. If you feel as I do, then you will be doubly pleased to know that Fritz's interest in American history has impelled her to write biographies of many of the people who created our history — Christopher Columbus, John Hancock, Paul Revere, Patrick Henry, Ben Franklin, Sam Adams, and others. However, it isn't who Fritz writes about but how she writes that I would like to describe for you, using the three criteria of sparking interest by bringing past events and people to life, giving a perspective of how events and people fit together to make history, and making the process look so interesting that children want to become researchers themselves.

Fritz's way of arousing the reader's interest and helping us to see the person as real is to use interesting details and show the humor of the situation. Her introductory paragraph on the life of Paul Revere lists the number of streets, lanes, alleys, brick houses, wooden houses, churches, schools and horses in Boston in 1735 — plus so many dogs that a law was passed prohibiting people from having dogs that were more than ten inches high. But as Fritz wittily points out, "it was difficult to keep dogs from growing more than 10 inches and few people cared to part with their 11 and 12 inch dogs," so they ignored the law. She explains how Paul forgot his spurs the night of his famous ride and sent his well-trained dog to get them. He also forgot a cloth to muffle the oars with, and one of his friends got a flannel petticoat from a ladyfriend who lived nearby. (Both children and adults, of course, love knowing that the lady just stepped out of the petticoat she was wearing and threw it down from her second-story window.)

Fritz illuminates Sam Adams's hatred for the British by describing the careful training he gave his dog, Queue, to bark, snap and even grab at the red coats of the British soldiers. She helps her reader understand John Hancock's love of fine clothes by describing his velvet breeches, gold and silver buckles, and the gold lace that "dripped down his shirt-front." We learn that Ben Franklin's ideas started when he was just a boy, inventing crude swim fins for his hands and feet or getting a kite to pull him across the pond. Fritz tells us that the fiery orator, Patrick Henry, was a likable, lazy, practical joker as a boy and didn't decide to become a lawyer until he was 24, married and the father of two children. The villain of the Revolutionary War, King George III, becomes a human being after we read Fritz's hilarious account of his wedding to sixteen-year-old Charlotte of Mecklenberg, Germany. The big day included an unexpected shower of sparks from
Shh! We’re Writing the Constitution describes the writing of the U.S. Constitution behind locked doors in Philadelphia. The varied personalities of the delegates are fascinating: Luther Martin from Maryland, who talked so long and repetitiously that even the faithful scribe, James Madison, didn’t write what he said and Ben Franklin (81 years old) went to sleep. There were delegates who had to pay for overdue library books, one delegate who tasted the flesh of a mummy on display in the city (and reported it to be like old, smoked beef), and George Washington, who worried about whether the honeysuckle was nailed up against the house and the carrots thinned. Patrick Henry, the orator from Virginia, refused to go to the convention because he "smelt a rat," and when he read the finished constitution, he was furious because he thought the thirteen unique identities of the colonies were wiped out and because nothing was said in it about the basic rights of the people.

Besides making people and events come to life, Jean Fritz gives her readers a perspective of the events and people that fit together to make history. Her use of strong themes provides the reader with a small number of main ideas, making it possible to remember a lot of details because they are organized. Her title contains the theme for each book. Where Do You Think You’re Going, Christopher Columbus? highlights the determined sea captain who knew a lot about the sea but didn’t really know (or refused to admit, to his dying day) that he had discovered a new continent instead of a new way to the Indies. He was a visionary man who probably wouldn’t have accomplished his incredibly difficult task without being such an unlikely combination of a mystic, a religious man, and an expert at surviving the rigors of a sailing ship. And Then What Happened, Paul Revere? immediately tells the reader that Revere was a man on the go. Fritz’s oft-repeated phrase is "with coat-tails flying." His boyhood was full of the sights and sounds of the busy Boston waterfront, and his adult life never let down as he raised a large family, ran a successful silver business, joined the Sons of Liberty, made false teeth, munitions, political cartoons, bells, barns, and of course was a very accomplished horseman. Paul Revere and his famous ride epitomized the restless, youthful spirit of a new country dashing off to meet its destiny and promising freedom to everyone. Will You Sign Here, John Hancock? is a kind of a double theme, in that it ties Americans’ common knowledge of John Hancock’s very large signature on the Declaration of Independence to Hancock’s insatiable desire for favorable attention. Finally, Shh! We’re Writing the Constitution tells the reader that the secretly written document probably could not have been created in a public debate. Many more examples await the reader who wants to make sense out of history. Fritz comments that the "Founding Fathers are often spoken of as if they were a breed apart." She doubts that it’s healthy "to elevate our leaders from respect and affection to reverence.

"Surely children will be better off examining historic figures in rounded and realistic terms; nor need we apologize for their shortcomings." (The Horn Book, April, 1976)

Fritz admits that one of her favorite people is John Hancock, who in many ways was like a small boy who wanted to be liked. "We owe John Hancock a great deal; still he is not the serious figure who appears in our traditional history books.... I want the stories about him to survive. So many of them are funny!" (Something About the Author, Volume 29, "Jean Fritz," pp. 79-84)

Genuine affection for the people she writes about is what I think encourages Fritz’s readers to do research themselves. She recognizes that young people of any age read biography seeking insight into "the human condition.... In actual experience we are able to see so few lives in the
round and to follow them closely from beginning to end. I, for one, need to possess a certain number of relatively whole lives in the long span of history...." (The Horn Book, April, 1976)

When a compassionate author can place people's lives against the perspective of the time in which they lived, it inspires readers to find out what they want to know about famous people, or even their own ancestors.

The final invitation I give to the reader interested in research is to pick up Jean Fritz's humorous account of the boy who wanted to know what George Washington ate for breakfast. This enterprising youngster proceeds to enlist the aid of a librarian and his whole family to answer his question. True to Fritz's way with words, this tale of research in action by a child is amusing, fast-paced and accurate. She obviously finds history amusing, interesting, and she does it very well. I hope you'll find some of her books, read them, and plan to hear her talk at our July conference on nonfiction books for children (July 12-15, 1988).

By Jean Fritz:


Why Don't You Get a Horse, Sam Adams? Illustrated by Trina Schart Hyman. Coward, McCann & Geoghegan, 1974.

About Jean Fritz: