Same Old Stories?: A Feminist Critique of Juvenile Biographies

—Vicki S. Hallett

Ball, Heather. *Remarkable Women Writers*. Women's Hall of Fame. Toronto: Second Story, 2006. 120 pp. $7.95 pb. ISBN 1-897187-08-4.

Bedard, Michael. *William Blake: The Gates of Paradise*. Toronto: Tundra, 2006. 192 pp. $28.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-763-X.

Braun, Sandra. *Incredible Women Inventors*. Women's Hall of Fame. Toronto: Second Story, 2006. 120 pp. $10.95 pb. ISBN 1-897187-15-7.

Dublin, Anne. *June Callwood: A Life of Action*. Toronto: Second Story, 2006. 140 pp. $14.95 pb. ISBN 1-897187-14-9.

Goh, Chan Hon, and Cary Fagan. *Beyond the Dance: A Ballerina's Life*. Toronto: Tundra, 2002. 152 pp. $24.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-596-3.

Goodall, Lian. *Singing Toward the Future: The Story of Portia White*. Toronto: Napoleon, 2004. 65 pp. $18.95 hc. ISBN 1-894917-08-1.

Gorrell, Gena K. *Heart and Soul: The Story of Florence Nightingale*. Toronto: Tundra, 2005. 152 pp. $16.99 pb. ISBN 0-88776-703-6.

Gueldenpfennig, Sonia. *Spectacular Women in Space*. Women's Hall of Fame. Toronto: Second Story, 2004. 112 pp. $10.95 pb. ISBN 1-896764-88-6.

Jacobson, Rick. *Picasso: Soul on Fire*. Illus. Laura Fernandez and Rick Jacobson. Toronto: Tundra, 2004. 32 pp. $22.99 hc. ISBN 0-88776-599-8.

Rooney, Frances. *Extraordinary Women Explorers*. Women's Hall of Fame. Toronto: Second Story, 2005. 120 pp. $10.95 pb. ISBN 1-896764-98-3.

Trottier, Maxine. *Terry Fox: A Story of Hope*. Markham: Scholastic, 2005. 30 pp. $16.99 hc. ISBN 0-439-94888-6.

Varmer, Hjordis. *Hans Christian Andersen: His Fairy Tale Life*. Illus Lilian Brogger. Toronto: Groundwood, 2005. 112 pp. $19.95 hc. ISBN 0-88899-690-X.

As I closed the cover on the last of these twelve biographies, I felt as if I had spent days immersed in a fantasy realm, one in which the political realities of the world had been held in suspension. This would not have been a bad feeling had I been reading fantasy, but since I was reading juvenile non-fiction, it was unsettling; it seemed that these life stories were, for the most part, deliberately glossing over the issues of sexism, heterosexism, and covert racism in Canadian society. Further, they were deliberately maintaining the hegemonic status of the individual through the hackneyed conventions of the biographical genre, where lives written often do not resemble lives lived.[1] I wondered if I was being too critical, but then again, these are important concerns for any theorist whose writing focuses upon children's literature, and specifically juvenile biography.

In *Well-Dressed Role Models*, Gale Eaton points out that the twentieth century has seen "trends [in biography] toward greater accuracy and away from didacticism" and "there have been repeated calls over the decades for more inclusiveness and diversity"(3) in subject choice. Yet, despite these trends, children "are rarely incited to challenge the rules of the world they inherit" (3–4). Thus, young readers are shown model lives that they are perhaps meant to emulate, but at the same time are being given the not-so-subtle message that leading a good life is equal to being a good, or compliant, citizen; to succeed one must uphold the status quo.

In almost all of these biographies, the lives that are considered worthy of mention are those that implicitly or explicitly maintain the status of the individual, the centrality of the heterosexual nuclear family, and the value of productivity. Peter Hunt, in his discussion of criticism and children's literature, suggests that we must examine not only the peritext and the text, but also the ideological implications of the text. Indeed, for me, the ideological implications are the most striking features of these books. What kinds of values are being imputed through what is said about the "characters," their lives and times, and their relevance to today's youth? This is a complicated question, for in these life stories, it is often the things that are not said that speak most distinctly.

Before I get ahead of myself, let me first state that this is a diverse set of juvenile biographies. The books target a broad age group (ranging from seven years to fourteen years and up) that encompasses vastly different developmental stages of childhood. The books also represent extremely varied and diverse subjects, mainly originating from North America and Western Europe, and span almost three hundred years of history. Thus, it is difficult to make any universal claims about the group as a

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whole. In spite of this, I think it is safe to say that most of these texts seem to be telling us variations of the same old stories. Uncomplicated, cohesive characters lead exemplary lives and accomplish great things, and we can know all about them by reading their biographies. As well, the societal status quo is rarely challenged. The ideologies of Western capitalism, heteronormativity, racism, and individualism remain entrenched in most of these texts, though the messaging may be subtle.

To begin my analysis, I turn again to Eaton, who suggests that "[j]uvenile biography, as a limited subgenre, has been shaped by both trends in biography for adults and by assumptions about what is appropriate to children" (8). This is particularly interesting because, according to Mary Evans, the growing tendency in auto/biography for adults since the 1960s has been to "tell all," a notion that is particularly focused upon the subject's sexual history. The growing influence of feminist and gay and lesbian theories, along with the desire to sell books through titillation, have been fuelling this trend. This trend has not been deemed appropriate for children. Within these twelve texts at least, sexuality is still a touchy subject for discussion. Lifetime heterosexual partnerships, such as the "match made in heaven" (Bedard 37) between William Blake and Catharine Boucher, his wife of forty-five years, are within the pale. Also celebrated are the conquests of men like Picasso: "Many women loved him, and he married twice" (Jacobson 21).

Any hint of sexuality that might fall outside the respectable lines of heterosexual marriage is virtually ignored, or assiduously glossed over. In the otherwise nuanced story of Nova Scotia singer Portia White written by Lian Goodall, White's experience of having a child out of wedlock in the 1930s is described as a "trial." The following passage contains all the details that we are given:

> When she was twenty-three years old, Portia gave birth to a baby boy. She named him Gerald. As a young unmarried woman, she

> made the difficult decision to entrust the baby to her cousin to raise as her own son. (19)

This passage is problematic for a number of reasons. There is no mention of the baby's father, who is able to ignore his responsibilities to the mother and the child (this is strikingly similar to news reports of a recent case in Ontario of a woman who abandoned her newborn baby in a Wal-Mart bathroom. Police were seeking the mother, but there was no mention of the father). There is also no discussion of the social circumstances that made this the most tenable, if difficult, choice for White. Why was being a young unwed mother so significant? Was race and/or class another mitigating factor? What was her relationship to the boy as he grew up? How have circumstances changed or remained the same for young, unwed black mothers in Nova Scotia? No answers are provided in even a peripheral manner. These omissions are decidedly disappointing in a book that, at other junctures, frankly discusses social realities such as poverty and racism.

Even more taboo is lesbian, gay, or bisexual experience. For example, in the volume by Frances Rooney, entitled *Extraordinary Women Explorers*, there is a particular section that is bothersome. It is about the adventurous lives of Edith S. Watson and Victoria Hayward. In this truncated biographical sketch of the two women wanderers/photographers/writers, Rooney describes their relationship thus: "It was in Bermuda in 1911 that Edith met Victoria Hayward. Victoria, a math teacher at a boy's private school in New York, had returned home to Bermuda and become a journalist. She visited Edith in Connecticut the next summer, and the two lived and worked together for the rest of their lives" (33). As well, after Edith dies in 1943, Victoria "took the train back to Connecticut with the casket" and, after staying "long enough to deal with Edith's will and the headstone for her grave" (36), she moved to Cape Cod, where she died in 1956. This certainly seems to indicate, to a knowledgeable reader, that a lesbian partnership existed between the two, but even if their connection was purely platonic, they must have loved each other or they would not have spent their entire lives together. I suppose lesbianism is too much for a juvenile audience to handle in a series of books that are supposedly about "[w]omen breaking new ground in areas once thought beyond them, and establishing a legacy for others to follow" (Second Story Press). Do queer youth not read biographies? Will heterosexual youth be scandalized by the mere mention of lives that transgressed hetero-boundaries? How early is too early to talk with children about sexuality?

Such protective tendencies echo what Perry Nodelman says about the lessons that children's literature is supposed to teach. He maintains:

> Children's books work to support two opposite assumptions about adult responsibilities toward children: Children need to learn how to be childlike, and adults must teach it to them. But: Children need to learn how to become adults, and adults must teach it to them. The ways that these opposing assumptions intersect becomes particularly interesting in informational books. Many such books undermine their own efforts to teach by doing so in ways that confirm the desirability of an appropriately childlike innocence. (161)

So, it would seem that "innocence" must be maintained at the cost of open discussions of sexuality, especially sexuality that might challenge the heteronormativity of Canadian society. This, of course, presumes a childhood innocence that is based upon an arrogant, adult confidence in childhood ignorance and a complete lack of sexual feelings on the part of anyone under the age of seventeen. Should particularly perceptive young readers detect the lesbianism in the relationship being described (or rather, not described), they will also perceive the impetus to keep such relationships, and any discussions of them, closeted.

It is also this assumption of innocence and ignorance that keeps most of these biographies from embarking on an honest exploration of the political realities of discrimination that their subjects faced, and that young people face today. While biographies are by their very nature about people, they also recount the social circumstances in which the people lived or live. Here, Gertrude Herman's definition of biography from 1978 is still relevant and helpful. She sees biography as "the recreating of the life, personality, and accomplishments of a human being, portrayed against the times and culture in which he [sic] lives" (89). Some of the books in this group, such as those about Hans Christian Andersen, Florence Nightingale, and Portia White, do a commendable job of conveying the times and cultures of their subjects. Others, such as the near hagiographical portrayal of Terry Fox, and the truly bad piece on Picasso, fail miserably at this task.

In Hjordis Varmer's text about the eccentric writer Hans Christian Andersen, we are treated to a balanced portrayal of nineteenth-century life in Denmark for a poor boy from Odense, as well as remarkable illustrations by Lilian Brogger that incorporate some of Andersen's own paper cut-outs. In his detailed text for children age ten and

up, Varmer portrays Andersen's embarrassment about his mentally ill grandfather, his alcoholic mother, and the family's poverty-stricken circumstances. We get a sense of the extreme class divisions in the kingdom at the time, and the combination of luck, patronage, talent, and tenacity that allowed Hans Christian Andersen to become a well-known and well-loved artist. We also are allowed to witness a "fairy tale life" that gives twenty-first-century children a taste of Andersen's fairy tales—stories that are poignant, dark, and decidedly not happily ever after. Unlike the Disney versions of fairy tales, these yarns respect children's ability to deal with fantastic ideas and triumphant successes alongside the subject's awkwardness, vanity, disappointment, and heartache.

In a similar vein, Gena Gorrell's portrait of Florence Nightingale, also intended for kids age ten and older, takes a rather unflinching look at this complex woman's society, and her mixed reactions to it. As a woman growing up in a privileged family in nineteenth-century England, Nightingale was expected to live a life of leisure, where accomplished young ladies attended parties, played piano, and embroidered pillowcases. As Gorrell puts it, "She was born into an age that wanted her to be submissive and retiring, into a class that wanted her to be decorative and amusing" (123). Debunking the many myths about Nightingale as an ideal nursemaid, Gorrell shows us a woman who was embedded in, and often frustrated by, the norms of Victorian society, and who railed against them in hopes of effecting real political changes. She was a fierce proponent of feminist ideals, yet did not fully support the burgeoning women's liberation movement of the time. She was a compassionate nurse and a determined advocate for soldiers' rights. She could be simultaneously stubborn, independent, dictatorial, and frail. A simple angel of mercy she was not.

One very sour note in Gorrell's text, however, is the introduction. In it, the author points out the vast differences between health care in the twenty-first century and that of the nineteenth century. She makes it plain that one's chances of survival in a modern hospital setting are far greater than in Nightingale's time, when most folks were nursed at home by the women in their family. I think this simplistic comparison of the nineteenth century's medical system with that of the modern era is meant to give children a comforting sense of the progress made in this arena. Two important points that the author fails to mention, however, (and I think Nightingale herself would be irate about this) are that in today's health-care establishments, at home and in hospitals, unpaid and underpaid

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women still bear the brunt of patient care, and that people from lower socio-economic classes in most nations, including Canada, still have poorer access to health-care services and medications and greater incidence of illness and disease than people from higher economic classes.

Books from the Women's Hall of Fame Series are disappointing for a similar reason. The vignettes about female inventors, writers, explorers, and astronauts contained in them are fascinating and have the noble goal of introducing young readers to accomplished and often little-known women, but the things these books leave unsaid speak volumes. For example, the back cover of *Incredible Women Inventors* reads, "At times when women were thought of as less 'smart,' they also had to invent new ways of succeeding, like running businesses." Statements like these are frequent in this series and are problematic for two interrelated reasons. Not only do they characterize the past in a one-dimensional manner, but they also make it seem as if we live in a world where sexism, racism, and classism are things fully of that past, where all forms of discrimination are mere artifacts of history and all people now enjoy the great benefits of a meritocracy. Strangely, for books that I anticipated would be filled with a feminist legacy and support for feminism's continued relevance, the underlying message seemed to be that the "F" word is now an unnecessary one for liberated women (and men) of the twenty-first century.

Lian Goodall's book on Portia White, despite the flaws discussed earlier, does do a better job of presenting some of the realities of racism in Canada throughout the twentieth century. The author also incorporates pieces of Black Canadian history into the story of the singer's life. What I particularly enjoyed was the way that Goodall told the story of White as an individual and also as a member of her community, a community that was extremely supportive of the singer throughout her career. Thus, White's struggle to overcome racist and sexist attitudes is also the story of her community's continuing challenges in the

"multicultural mosaic" of Canada. In a recollection about White's hairdresser Viola Desmond, who was arrested for sitting in the "whites only" section of a New Glasgow movie theatre, Goodall says, "Such was the day-to-day life faced by some Black Canadians in Nova Scotia in the 1940s. Demeaning social customs and prejudice were and still are hard to change" (45). This story, while important to include, would have been more effective had it not been labelled as "A Sad Story." This adjective choice and the relatively soft language about "social customs" gloss over the systematic and continued oppression of people of colour, and distort the current reality for young readers. A "sad" story indicates a situation that is unfortunate, but somehow unavoidable, almost accidental. The tale of a little girl losing her puppy dog is sad. The anecdote of a woman dealing with very deliberate racism that continues to be perpetuated by people and institutions today cannot be categorized in a similar way.

The relevance of such stories to current realities is not lost on child-readers. For, as Kimberly Reynolds posits, "The books children encounter provide them with the images, vocabularies, attitudes and structures to think about themselves, what happens to them, and how the world around them operates" (3). While Reynolds's thesis is meant to apply to fictional texts, I think it is particularly apt for a discussion of non-fiction as well. Books that purport to give children role models for leading exemplary lives and inspiration to follow their dreams are certainly influencing children's conceptions of their world and how it operates.

Two life stories that I think are particularly meant to "inspire" young readers are those of June Callwood and Terry Fox. Undoubtedly, these two people are recognized in Canada as heroic icons of self-sacrifice and determination. Their biographies serve to redouble this idea. Anne Dublin's study of the life of June Callwood, published before her death this past year, is a good example of the type of biography that situates its subject in a historical context. We get solid background on Callwood and her life of unceasing activism, with plenty of references to feminist and social-justice work. As I read it, at first I rejoiced that here, finally, was a book that was not going to shy away from the political aspects of the subject's life. It certainly did not, to the author's credit. As the book wore on, however, I began to feel an itch somewhere in the back of my skull. Finally, near the end, I realized what it was. On page 106, the author writes, "Although other people have called June Callwood a saint, she doesn't see herself as one" (106). Reading this line brought to mind Gertrude Herman's critique. As she put

it, "Too often biography for children verges into hagiography . . ." (89). Even if Callwood didn't see herself as a saint, one gets the impression that her biographer most certainly did. This implication of sainthood is bothersome because it is something with which Callwood herself was uncomfortable, and detracts from the very human sacrifices Callwood's activism, journalism, and family work required.

Similarly, Terry Fox's biographer, Maxine Trottier, paints the undeniably heroic story of this creator of the Marathon of Hope as singularly saintly. Perhaps, given the young age group for whom the book is intended (ages seven and up), the author felt that she needed to be particularly upbeat about this tragic story, but I think that even seven-year-olds will realize that her account of eighteen-year-old Fox's reaction to his diagnosis of cancer and immediate leg amputation is unbelievable. She maintains that, "At first he cried at the thought of what had happened, at what faced him, but Terry pulled himself together. This was just one more challenge" (9). Much like the stories of the saints I heard growing up in the Catholic Church, these two works inspire feelings of inadequacy and humiliation at my own all-too-human weaknesses. Would young children share my reaction? I cannot be sure, but if they did, they, like me, would find it impossible to believe that they could accomplish anything as great as a saint could, or with the same unflappable aplomb.

For this reason, it becomes essential to point out that "Alternatives, missed chances, roads not taken, accidents and hesitations, the whole 'swarm of possibilities' that hums around our every experience, too often disappears in the smoothing biographical process"(Lee 1). As a result, the lives represented in biographies often seem to have been decreed by fate before the subject was even born. This smoothing process that Lee describes for biographies written for adults can be even more pronounced in juvenile biographies. A particularly wrinkle-free example is the life story of Picasso, who was apparently fixated from birth on his artistic goals.

In Rick Jacobson's still-life study of Picasso, we are treated to beautiful illustrations by the author and Laura Fernandez. These illustrations are the best part of the book. Perhaps they are the excuse for the biography's existence. The text itself, intended for readers age ten and up, is a repetitious and slavish tribute to the artist's "genius." While the author claims to discuss the emotional inspiration behind Picasso's works, the only things fitting for his inspiration seem to be his friend's death and war. Of course, these things would be inspiring, but there is no mention of other momentous events such as the births

of his children, or his relationships with female companions, or the deaths of his parents. Were these things not inspiring also? The artist is also depicted as a prodigy, whose art flowed naturally and without interruption for almost his entire life. Did Picasso never have moments of indecision or self-doubt? Such things simply do not fit neatly into the author's portrait of the artist as a virile "man of action" (21).

By contrast, the story of Chan Hon Goh, principal ballerina for the National Ballet of Canada, is one that gives a more complex description of the artist's drive, determination, and doubts about her career. We get details about the dancer's childhood in Communist China and her years as a new immigrant in Vancouver, where early on she encountered racism in the schoolyard and isolation from her peers. These details create context. That is, until the smoothing process begins. The racism is never analyzed and it seems to disappear after her father writes a note to her teacher. This is a little too pat, and I would have liked to hear more about how this might have affected her, and whether or not she experienced it at any other points in her life. What we do learn is that these experiences made the young girl even more determined to "fit in" and make friends; an understandable, though problematic, solution. We also learn that the dancer had a brush with disordered eating habits in her teenage years. It is pointed out that many ballerinas deal with this issue throughout their careers, but there is no critique of the stringent aesthetics ballerinas must maintain. Her experiences are also rarely connected with the larger Chinese community, or other immigrant communities, in order to further contextualize them for readers. I am not suggesting that she should be the poster child for the Chinese immigrant community, but one gets the impression that outside of the world of dance and her family, there is little to which Goh pays attention. Indeed, this is made explicit at the end of the text when, in a reflective moment, the successful ballerina admits that "[b]allet takes so much time and dedication that it is difficult to pursue other interests or fields of education. A dancer spends years learning a kind of 'language' that is understood only in the dance world" (149).

Yet another portrait of a single-minded artist is that of William Blake. The most detailed character sketch to be found in these texts is perhaps that of Blake by Michael Bedard. Indeed, in its attention to minutiae, it resembles one of Blake's painstaking etchings in copper plate, examples of which illustrate the text. Through "an intricate network of lines" (Bedard 18) connecting the variegated strands of Blake's life, the author is determined to help us understand the misunderstood visionary

artist/poet. One hopes the intended audience of fourteen-year-olds will have the patience to get through one hundred and ninety-two pages of Blake's often-tortured existence.

In addition to this attention to detail, Bedard's text is also the most thematically unified of the twelve. Blake's dreams and visions infuse the entire book. Certainly, dreams were a common theme among the twelve biographies reviewed, but nowhere were they more prevalent than in William Blake's story. At the outset, we learn that "William's parents saw that this child was different from an early age. He was a dreamer, and he possessed a powerful imagination" (10). This trope of dreams and visions is central to the story of Blake's turbulent life and lends it an ethereal quality despite the vivid historical details of life in England at the dawn of the industrial revolution. This trope sometimes serves to undermine the incredible fact of Blake's life-long resistance to the prevailing winds of "progress" in the mechanical age by making him appear disconnected from reality. Blake was a man for whom reality was as much spiritual as it was material, however, and this perceived disconnect is perhaps more aptly viewed as his connection to multiple lived realities.

So, while it was a little long, Blake's biography did satisfy my desire to read a book that held a multifaceted gem of a life. This desire has less to do with the brilliance of that life and much more to do with what Gertrude Herman says about the benefits of such writing. She posits that "young people have much to gain from reading about real human beings in all their complexity, with all their sometimes troubled lives"(89). I agree that stories about people with flaws, who make good and bad decisions, and who face systemic oppressions would portray for children more nuanced and balanced versions of what it means to be human, or to live "good" lives. Thankfully, complex characters did appear in many of the books, such as those focused on Florence Nightingale, Hans Christian Andersen, and Portia White.

Unfortunately, however, complexity of character and life was missing from many of the texts reviewed. Owing perhaps to the brevity of its pieces, the Women's Hall of Fame Series, intended for readers aged nine to thirteen, suffers most obviously from this lack of depth. We get but tantalizing glimpses of the fascinating lives, and of the varied and valuable role models these women might, or might not, make. This trait is less forgivable in the longer texts, especially those on Terry Fox and Picasso, where the subjects seem to be one-dimensional paper cut-outs of people.

According to Hermione Lee, "What makes biography so endlessly engaging is that through all the documents and letters and witnesses, the

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conflicting opinions and partial memories and fictionalized versions, we keep catching sight of a real body, a physical life . . ."(2). This was just what I felt was missing from many of these biographies—a real body, a corporeal, flawed human being. Picasso, especially, appeared as a mere idea, a figure of "towering brilliance" (Jacobson 21) with virtually no physical existence at all. Names of his wives, lovers, and children do not appear until the last two pages of the text, and then only as part of a timeline of significant events and periods in the artist's life. Indeed, such lists and/or indices are common to many of the biographies, suggesting, as Eaton notes, that such books have become more of a learning tool for school assignments than for children's actual enjoyment. The real physical body and the fascinating life do not seem as important as the "significant accomplishments" that can be regurgitated in a class essay.

I wonder how much more interesting the book about Picasso's genius would be for young readers if such genius could be seen to spring from an imperfect source. How much more inspiring for children to learn that their heroes were also human beings? Children, though they may not be able to articulate it, already know that they have foibles; they have desires that are not always to be spoken. In other words, they have a developing shadow.

In "The Child and the Shadow," Ursula LeGuin has written about this idea of a child's dark side in relation to the stories of Hans Christian Andersen, and how they spoke to her as a ten-year-old. She says, "it was to that, to the unknown depths in me, that the story spoke; and it was the depths which responded to it and, nonverbally, irrationally, understood it, and learned from it" (316). It is this shadow, this unconscious darkness present in us all, that I particularly wish for children to encounter in juvenile biographies. In such rendezvous, children not only meet interesting and inspiring individuals, but also meet themselves. The learning involved might not allow kids to regurgitate names and dates on a test, but it may allow their passions—for art, for history, for politics, for sport—to be kindled. The shadow is not threatening to children. On the contrary, it is already in them, and to deny it is to deny children's

complex humanity.

Indeed, even truth has its shadow. So, if one of the purposes of these new juvenile biographies is for use as a learning tool for the classroom, then all the shadows must be faced. How credible are these stories, and how much are we expected to take as "truth" versus supposition? If, as Mary Evans cautions, "the genres of autobiography and biography cannot represent what they claim to represent, namely the "whole" life of a person [and that] this "whole" person is in any case a fiction, a belief created by the very form of auto/biography itself"(1), then what are we to make of such fiction presented to children as fact? Do children implicitly understand that the subjects of these biographies cannot possibly be fully known, or understood, as they appear in these texts? Are educators telling their young students that despite being non-fiction books, some of them very well researched, in order to be fully enjoyed they must be taken with a grain of salt?

There is little evidence of critical engagement in the biographies I read for this article. On the whole, they imply a sense of historical truth that would not lead young readers to question the veracity of the information presented. Most of the books, with the exception of those on Terry Fox and Picasso, have bibliographies, showing their more scholarly roots, and reinforcing the sense that they should be regarded as accurate depictions. None but the biography of Hans Christian Andersen, however, has recommendations for further reading about its subject. The Women's Hall of Fame Series does suggest to curious readers that they look up other remarkable women in libraries or on Google, but offers no other prompts toward questioning their content. This is a significant oversight, particularly in a series that has specifically stated feminist origins.[2]

Perhaps the most insidious ideological impact of these books is the unquestioned and unquestioning notion that young readers should be able to know another individual's life through biography. I did not find, as Gale Eaton did, that "book design in 1996 was more likely to engage the reader as a critical observer, rather than a vicarious participant" (250). On the contrary, most of the books I read gave the impression of a "whole," unified, and knowable subject who had lived an exemplary life—a subject for the reader to identify with and emulate. Of course, these twelve books are hardly a representative sample of modern juvenile biography as a whole, but they did not inspire confidence that children are being encouraged to develop a critical awareness or distance from the subject, despite an overall journalistic style and emphasis on illustration, factors which Eaton thinks contribute to the

adoption of such viewpoints.

So, are these biographies indeed the same old stories? Well, the best answer I can give is "yes and no." Yes, in that children are still being led to believe that we can glean historical truth from stories of people's lives, and that we can truly know an individual through this particular genre of writing. Yes, in that such life stories are still a didactic tool for teaching children how to live "good" lives as cooperative citizens. Yes, in that these good citizens must accept the norms of Western capitalism, individualism, covert racism, and the heterosexual nuclear family unit. No, because we are getting more varied and wide-ranging lives represented in these books than perhaps ever before, with the occasional glimpse of imperfect people, who may have rocked the proverbial boat on occasion.

Books I would recommend without hesitation for young readers to enjoy, to learn from, and to spur their imaginations are Hjordis Varmer's *Hans Christian Andersen: His Fairytale Life*, Gena K. Gorrell's *Heart and Soul: The Story of Florence Nightingale*, and Michael Bedard's *William Blake: The Gates of Paradise*. In these books, new stories are emerging, narratives that are fresh and alive with idiosyncrasies of character and historical contextualization. Others I would like to see taught in schools by critically aware teachers who are unafraid to look into the shadows or encourage questions in young student's minds. These are Lian Goodall's *Singing Toward the Future: The Story of Portia White*, Anne Dublin's *June Callwood: A Life of Action*, and the Women's Hall of Fame Series, if only to point out to young readers of all genders that women have always been making history, for good or ill. I wish I could unreservedly endorse more of these texts. That will not be possible, however, until authors and publishers decide to stop treating biography as an infallible ideological tool that assumes children's simultaneous innocence and ignorance of the world around

Notes

[1] Gertrude Herman holds that "[i]n its simplest terms, a biography may be defined as the recreating of the life, personality, and accomplishments of a human being, portrayed against the times and culture in which he [sic] lives"(89). She goes on to say that "this re-creation [. . .] need not, indeed cannot, be complete"(89) for one never knows the entirety of another person's life, and materials are always selectively included. (Mary Evans and other literary theorists of auto/biography echo this point.) The manner in which this selection of materials is done, and their presentation accomplished, is, mainly, the purview of the author. Thus, depending on the author's skill, ideological bent, and so forth, the biography can become merely a "fruitless effort to describe the 'perfect' life," or alternatively it may "make profound claims upon the imagination and intellectual capacities of the reader"(89).

[2] The tag line for Second Story Press on the Google search results page (accessed 18 April 2008) claims that the press "Publishes feminist books for adults and young readers." On their website, an article by Gillian O'Reilly, "Inside Second Story Press," states that "Second Story's list includes a mixture of feminist fiction and non-fiction, Judaica and children's books, both fiction and non-fiction." As well, on the Jacket Flap website, Second Story is described as "a small Canadian feminist press . . . " ("Publisher Information").

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