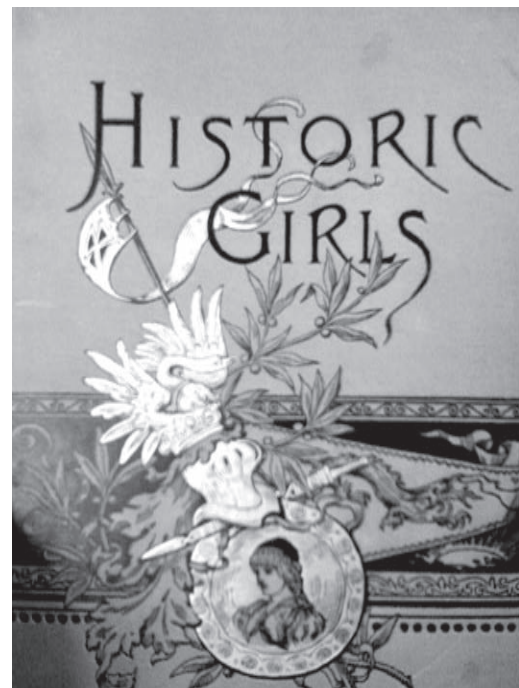


Searching for She-roes

A Study of Biographies of Historic Women Written for Children

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You'll never believe the women I've met:

- *Nellie Bly as she experienced the torture of backbreaking factory work to be able to write her newspaper story with honesty;*
- *Amelia Earhart encountering the failure of her altimeter while snow and ice coated her windshield as she attempted to be the first woman to fly the Atlantic;*
- *Marie Antoinette as she faced meeting the loveless face of the French Dauphin to whom she was betrothed;*
- *Althea Gibson as she faced her opponents as the first African American woman ever to compete at Wimbledon;*
- *Elizabeth Blackwell as she endured the discrimination of men as she searched for a college to train her as a doctor;*
- *Eleanor Roosevelt as she stood to address the United Nations, representing the United States after her husband's death; and*
- *Sacagawea as she approached Native Americans to help bring peace between them and Lewis and Clark.*

It seems as though adults have always written and published biographies for children, stories like those mentioned above, in the hope that the lives of those written about will in some way inspire the child reader to make the most of her own life. The difference, I've found, between successful and unsuccessful biographies, may well lie in the styles in which they are written, illustrated, and packaged—even more than the choice of biographee or the content the author chooses to share. A brief look back at some of the priceless biographies housed in the Baldwin Collection at the Special Collections Library at the George A. Smathers Library at the University of Florida in Gainesville—with a particular interest in books about Amelia Earhart—will show you what I mean.

Being a woman—a poor child of the 1960s who searched relentlessly in biographies of women to inspire myself—I focused on what historically girls have been offered over the decades, indeed centuries, as models. I remember my elementary school library biography section clearly: three shelves of thick tomes and a series titled “The Childhood of Famous Americans.”

As a second grader perusing these shelves, I overlooked the daunting, thick books and began to work my way through the Childhood of Famous Americans series. I can't remember which individual titles spoke to me the most clearly, nor how



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many I actually read before outgrowing them and moving on to more difficult titles, but I can remember them having a deep impact on my ideas of possibilities for my life.

As a child growing up in a very poor farm family, where food was abundant but opportunities seemed scarce, the picture these books created of what I could become was powerful. Because of my background, what girls have been offered throughout the decades and centuries as models is important to me.

The oldest biography I discovered, a collective biography published in 1795, titled *Plutarch's Lives Abridged; in which The Historical Parts are Carefully Preserved, and the Comparisons of the Respective Lives Accurately Delineated, Calculated for the Instruction of Youth*, does not contain any women as subjects. However, wives, mistresses, and daughters of the biographees are mentioned—sometimes even by name.

The first few titles deeming it fit to include women were small chapbooks that completely sanitized their subjects and unabashedly promoted their pious Protestant ways. The first of such books was *Biography for Girls; or, Moral and Instructive Examples for the Female Sex*, published in London in 1814. By the 1820s, a few authors began to include lives of famous women, but with the same purpose, and told in the same overly dramatic, sanitized fashion.

Some authors, even females, degraded the accomplishments of women. One example is Mrs. Jameson's *Memoirs of Celebrated Female Sovereigns*, one of the first books to focus on famous women. In the preface, she states the purpose of the book:

The intention of this work is to present in a small compass, and at one view, an idea of the influence with a female government has had *generally* on men and nations, and of the influence which the possession of power has had *individually* on the female character.¹

Her conclusion is this:

On the whole, it seems indisputable that the experiments hitherto made in the way of female government have been signally unfortunate; and that women called to empire have been, in most cases, conspicuously unhappy or criminal. So that, were we to judge by the past, it might be decided at once, that the power which belongs to us, as a sex, is not properly or naturally that of the scepter or the sword.²

A notable exception to this trend is a set of eight volumes that encompasses the autobiography of the Countess de Genlis, published in 1825, and titled *Memoirs of the Countess de Genlis, Illustrative of the History of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Her full name was Stéphanie Félicité Ducrest de



St.-Aubin. She was a French writer of books for children and adults, musician, educator, and all-around flamboyant character who escaped to England during the French Revolution. It was totally refreshing to find a female who wasn't the perfect Protestant and example of her gender—probably because she was writing it herself. She purports to counter what others have written about her, those “scandalous anecdotes.”³ What is most intriguing, however, is the voice:

I was born so small and so weakly that they would not venture to put me in swaddling clothes, and a few moments after my birth, I was on the point of losing my life. I had been placed in a down pillow, of which, to keep me warm, the two sides were folded over me, and fastened with a pin; and thus wrapped up, I was laid upon an arm-chair in the room. The judge of the district, who was almost blind, came to pay his visit of compliment to my father; and as, in his country fashion, he separated the huge flaps of his coat to sit down, someone saw that he was going to place himself in the arm-chair where I was; luckily he was prevented from sitting down, and I escaped being crushed to death.⁴

Though most likely a set written for adults, children of the time most likely enjoyed the humor and storyteller's style as well.

By the mid-1800s, the style of writing was becoming less preachy, and somewhat more engaging. The content became more realistic, and the subjects were more often famous women than commoners.

Fewer collections, and more individual biographies, appeared; quotations were sometimes used, but still very few books listed references consulted. One biographer, Jacob Abbott, in writing *The Life of Elizabeth, Queen of England* (1850), states in the beginning pages that he was “to confine himself very strictly . . . to historic truth . . . with no intentional embellishment.”⁵

Furthermore, in perusing the contents page, I found a chapter entitled “Elizabeth's Lovers,” but upon reading the chapter found that although she never married, “it was not for want of lovers, or rather of admirers and suitors, that Elizabeth lived single all her days.”⁶ Her character isn't completely sanitized; there is talk of plots and relationships, though nothing openly.

I happened upon another book published around the same time: the first biography of an African American. *Aunt Sally; or, The Cross the Way of Freedom. A Narrative of the Slave-life and Purchase of the Mother of Rev. Isaac Williams, of Detroit, Michigan* was published in 1866 with no author's name listed. The story is interesting in that it is the first slave narrative I encountered at the Baldwin collection. However, like so many others, it was written to prove the worthiness of Protestantism. Its style is heavy-handed and preachy, but the story is told in

a more engaging manner than those early in the century. The book includes some drawings, poetry, and hymns.

The second autobiography I encountered of a girl was published in 1878 by Margaret S. Jeune and titled *My School-Days in Paris*. Though France was predominantly a Catholic country, Protestantism was first mentioned on the second page and was brought up frequently thereafter.

Like de Genlis' book, it seems to have been written in later years as an adult recalling her childhood. Unlike de Genlis' autobiography, however, Jeune chose the writing style of the early 1800s: lengthy sentences and a stuffier manner. It is, however, the first book I have found with captions to explain action in the drawings.

The first half of the twentieth century ushered in the first biographies to use photographs, the first picturebook, and series books, such as the *Childhood of Famous Americans* series, which I will discuss in a later section on books about Amelia Earhart. The style of most of the biographies of this time period still included "lesson teaching." The biographees' lives were still quite sanitized, though they were made more engaging with the introduction of fabricated conversations. Bibliographies appeared, though the citations were incomplete.

The first biography I found to use photographs was *The Girl Who Found the Blue Bird: A Visit to Helen Keller* (1914) by Georgette Leblanc. It includes one photo of Helen and one of the author herself. Possibly because it is a translation, it is very poetic and flowery in style; I can't imagine a child enjoying it.

The Little Girl Who Waved: The Story of "Curly Top" by Clara A. Ford, published in 1937, is the first biography in the collection to resemble a picturebook. Though it is broken into short chapters, the sentences and paragraphs are shorter, and the vocabulary is simpler: "[Curly Top] listened. First there was a far-away whisper. Then a great rumbling, grumbling. Then a roar as the train rushed by the house."⁷

There is liberal use of photographs to help tell the story. The concluding pages are used as a picture timeline to illustrate how the land through which the train now runs—providing Curly Top with others to wave to—has changed over time. The book is told through the child's point of view and was obviously meant for a child to read to herself. Though pictures and story are static when measured by today's picturebook standards, it was revolutionary for its time.

This also is the time period of the first Ingri and Edgar d'Aulaire biography, *Pocahontas* (1946). It is the first picturebook I encountered in the fashion of what picturebooks look like today; that is, the larger size, full color, and simpler, shorter text. On rereading, it is apparent that it is a book of its time with the usual shortcomings—an overriding focus on Christianity, stereotypical and

condescending portrayal of Native Americans, didacticism—but with not nearly as many as books from earlier time periods.

The first biography I found to include a bibliography, albeit incomplete, was Jeannette Eaton's *A Daughter of the Seine: The Life of Madame Roland*, published in 1938. It also is unique in that it includes other features of nonfiction, such as a glossary, suggestions for additional reading, suggestions for projects, questions for discussion, and endnotes. Though the writing style is stuffy and adult-oriented, it possibly could have been for school use, although it is not noted as such in the book.

One notable exception to the style of the time period is Jeannette L. Gilder's *The Autobiography of a Tomboy* (1900). As a pioneer in journalism for women writing for several newspapers and magazines in New England, Gilder looks back at her childhood with a fresh voice. This autobiography is hilarious, told as if she were still that child; her use of description and dialogue makes this book a gem:

Every one said that I was a tomboy; and, being a good American, I bowed to the verdict of the majority and was happy. I never quite understood why a girl who climbed trees, clung to the tail-end of carts, and otherwise deported herself as a well-conditioned girl should not, was called a tomboy. It always seemed to me that, if she was anything she should not be, it was a tomgirl. However, tomboy was the accepted name for such girls as I was, and there was no use in arguing the case. After all, it made little difference. I did not care what they called me, so long as they let me alone; but that they were loathe to do."⁸

A hilarious tale, told through anecdotes, in an engaging writer's voice.

Biographies for children published in the second half of the twentieth century made liberal use of photographs of their subjects at various ages and at critical times. Stories of famous women became the rule, and the variety of fields from which the biographees were chosen was wide. Fabricated conversations started to disappear as authors treated their subjects much more objectively. Bibliographies and indexes were far more complete and more consistently appeared in the books. Modern women, as well as historic figures, began to be dealt with.

One book, Langston Hughes' *Famous American Negroes* (1954), is told simply and matter-of-factly, narrating both the biographees' accomplishments and incidents of racial discrimination. Interestingly enough, of the seventeen individuals listed, only three are women—Phyllis Wheatley, Harriet Tubman, and Marian Anderson. Unlike racial discrimination, little is said about discrimination because of gender.

Another biography of the time period, Julia Carson's *Mary Cassatt* (1966), was told more objectively than most previous



biographies, using only direct quotations. Reproductions of her paintings are included, as is a very complete bibliography.

Biases, however, were still apparent in the writing of the time period. For example, Tobi Tobias and Michael Hampshire, for the most part, created an acceptable picturebook, *Maria Tallchief*, with drawings done in soft, muted browns, whites, yellows, and oranges. The writing style is serviceable, though not particularly lively. However, the widely held assumption of a woman's role comes through in this line: "Maria's ballet career was a success, but her marriage to Mr. Balanchine had become very unhappy. Like most women, she wanted to have children."⁹

And in a 1983 biography of Sally Ride, *Sally Ride and the New Astronauts: Scientists in Space*, which does a good job of focusing on Ride's qualifications and contributions to the space program, author Karen O'Connor felt compelled to comment on Ride's appearance: "Before the session was over, trainers would hook the pretty, dark-haired astronaut by rope to a motorboat."¹⁰ I would be surprised to read similar comments about the appearance of male astronauts in books written during the same time period.

One biography that demonstrates how the writing style can hook a reader quickly is Florence Meiman White's 1980 book *First Woman in Congress: Jeannette Rankin*. Here's how the story begins:

"Jeannette! Jeannette!" It was her father's voice, urgent.

Jeannette was about to mount her mare. Instead, she turned to see John Rankin hurrying toward the stables, leading his favorite horse by the reins. Why was he walking? She wondered. Was there something wrong? She ran toward him. As they drew close to each other, her eyes opened wide with horror. Blood was gushing from the horse's right side.

"What happened, Father?" Jeannette asked anxiously.

"Got caught on a barbed wire fence. Get a needle and thread, Jeannette. Quickly!"

As her father led the injured horse into the stable, Jeannette ran to the house. In a few minutes, she returned with strong thread and a darning needle, a large clean towel and a bucket of hot water.

The twelve-year-old girl got down on her knees, washed the open sore, then carefully sewed together the torn flesh. The wounded animal writhed in pain. "You'll be fine, boy," she whispered, as she laid a comforting hand on the horse's head. He turned his grateful eyes upon her.

"Good work, Jeannette. You've done a fine job." Her father's voice was filled with admiration.¹¹

I can't imagine any child not being drawn into a book beginning in this way.

Another biography written during this time that broke new ground in how the story is told is Richard Gibbs' *Women Prime Ministers*, published in 1981. The writing is factual, though

somewhat opinionated, but what's the most fascinating is Gibbs' use of timelines, drawings, maps, and sidebars. This format, relatively new to the time, enlivens the stories of four pioneering women who broke stereotypes to rule their countries—Sirimavo Bandaranaike, the first woman prime minister of any country, who ruled Sri Lanka in the 1960s; Golda Meir, prime minister of Israel during the 1960s; Indira Gandhi, ruler of India in the 1960s and 1970s; and Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of Great Britain from the 1970s to 1990s.

More Modern Approaches

Beginning in the 1990s and continuing into the writing, illustrating, and publishing of biographies for children today, I found a definite shift in how biographies are created for children. Primary sources are regularly cited and even photographed and included in the book, far more extensive bibliographies are written, and much more attractive packaging of the books makes them irresistible.

Far more picturebooks are published, making the biographees' lives more interesting and accessible to younger readers. The writing style is often as if the story is being told orally, but there is also a tendency, especially in picturebooks, to blur the line between nonfiction and fiction.

I could cite many biographies from the Baldwin collection to illustrate what I mean, but I'll let just a handful of them tell this part of the story. The use of primary sources, especially diaries, and sometimes including photographs, became popular. *Billie Holiday* by Bud Kliment (1990) is written using many primary sources, including newspaper and magazine articles, which are photographically reproduced.

A biography of Sojourner Truth, *Ain't I a Woman?* by Patricia and Fredrick McKissack in 1992, allows Truth herself to tell her own story through selections from her autobiography, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth: A Northern Slave*, published in 1850, and through the eyes of those who knew her.

And Susanna Reich, in her 1999 biography *Clara Schumann: Piano Virtuoso*, includes a final chapter explaining her liberal use of diaries, letters, music manuscripts, photos, drawings, concert programs, newspapers, magazines, books, and articles.

A couple of "almost biographies," or picturebooks that are a crucial snippet of a person's life, written in the late twentieth century, are William Miller's *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* (1994) and Michael Bedard's *The Divide* (1997). The first tells of Hurston's mother's death and the profound impact she and the storytellers of the community made on her future writing life. The second relates the point in Willa Cather's life when her family moved west, and the enormous responsibility it placed on her. It is written very poetically and could easily be confused with fiction. Both are beautifully illustrated.

Some are told in a style that appeals strongly to the senses, such as the McKissacks' story of playwright Lorraine Hansberry. Published in 1998, *Young, Black, and Determined: A Biography*

of *Lorraine Hansberry* is told in a way that places the reader alongside the subject. In describing Hansberry's childhood home, the authors write, "Children played hopscotch and tag together in the park, shared dill pickles that reeked of garlic, and fought over who said what about whom."¹²

Others are told with an excess of drama. Josephine Poole's 1997 picturebook *Joan of Arc* is illustrated in rich, classic paintings, but the dramatic text blurs the edges between fact and fiction. "But that was not the end. A saint is like a star. A star and a saint shine forever."¹³

Still others are intentionally fictionalized. When Nikki Grimes wrote *Talkin' About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*, she noted, "The form of the following story is fictional, but the story itself is based on fact."¹⁴ In twenty-one free verse poems, Bessie's life is revealed through the point of view of others who were important in her life.

One contemporary biographer, Don Brown, a prolific picture-book writer and illustrator, has created stories of lesser-known women that reflect their personalities. In *Ruth Law Thrills a Nation*, he pairs humorous, colorful watercolor paintings with a snappy text to show the verve and daring of Law:

On November 19, 1916, Ruth Law tried to fly from Chicago to New York City in one day.

It had never been done before.

It was a frosty, blustery morning, Ruth woke up before dawn, but she did not feel the cold. To get used to the cold weather, she had slept in a tent on the roof of a Chicago hotel.¹⁵

In his 1999 title *Rare Treasure: Mary Anning and Her Remarkable Discoveries*, Brown combines mysterious, earth-toned illustrations with rich text:

Mary Anning lived from 1799 to 1847, but her spirit dwelled in a time millions of years ago, when the monsters and dragons we now call dinosaurs roamed. She had little money, but she was rich in spirit. She was unschooled, but the professors heeded her words. She rarely strayed from her home, but her name became known everywhere. Mary Anning pried fossils from the ground, but it was knowledge she unearthed.¹⁶

And Brown mixes hazy, ethereal imagery and a contemplative tone in *Far Beyond the Garden Gate: Alexandra David-Neel's Journey to Lhasa*:

Alexandra and Yongden tramp for miles through silent forests. Clearings reveal "shining snow-clad mountains, towering high in the blue sky, frozen torrents and glittering waterfalls hanging like gigantic . . . curtains from the rugged rocks."¹⁷

Brown has helped set the bar high for others to reach in creating engaging picturebook biographies.

Two other titles—one an autobiography, the other a biography—tell their stories in unique voices. Ruby Bridges tells her

own story in *Through My Eyes*, a picturebook. She also adds the voices of several others on both sides of the controversy. Alternating between stunning photos and revealing text, she brings to life her amazing story:

When I was six years old, the civil rights movement came knocking at the door. It was 1960, and history pushed in and swept me up in a whirlwind. At the time, I knew little about the racial fears and hatred in Louisiana, where I was growing up. Young children never know about racism at the start. It's we adults who teach it.¹⁸

One biography featuring a unique voice is *My Name is Celia: The Life of Celia Cruz/Me llamo Celia: La vida de Celia Cruz* by Monica Brown, published in 2004. It is the first bilingual biography of a woman that I uncovered in the collection, and the colorful, energetic illustrations and melodic text echo the salsa music Celia created:

Sugar! My voice is strong, smooth, and sweet. I will make you feel like dancing. Close your eyes and listen. My voice feels like feet skipping on cool wet sand, like running under a waterfall, like rolling down a hill. My voice climbs and rocks and dips and flips with the sounds of congas beating and trumpets blaring. Boom boom boom! Beat the congas. Clap clap clap! Go the hands. Shake shake shake! Go the hips. I am the Queen of Salsa and I invite you to come dance with me.¹⁹

I can't think of a better way to use style to hook children into a biography!

And radically different formats for relating other's lives have come on the children's books scene. The best example I discovered at the Baldwin Collection of Historic Children's Literature is *To Dance*, an autobiography by Siena Cherson Siegel, published in 2006. Michele Gorman, in a 2008 article published in *School Library Journal*, sums up the benefits of graphic novels for children:

Graphic novels are now addressing important personal and social issues like the power of imagination, being true to one's self, the benefits of teamwork, and how to cope with divorce and bullying. Teachers and librarians are also beginning to realize that these books are perfect for young readers who are making the transition from picturebooks to text-only titles. And with graphic novels' hypnotic power to pull kids into a story, they're also perfect for promoting recreational or free voluntary reading—one of the most effective ways to increase literacy and create lifelong readers.²⁰

Siegel, a Puerto Rican native and former dancer in the New York City Ballet, wrote *To Dance*, a Sibert Honor title, in an informative but emotional style. Her husband, Mark Siegel, illustrated the book in a lively, energetic manner. What a treat to be able to offer children biographies as enticing as this!

Earhart in Biographies

The first three children's books about Amelia Earhart, as I studied them at the Baldwin Collection, made their appearance in the

first half of the twentieth century. The first, published in 1942, is called *Heroines of the Sky*, a collection of an overview of eighteen women aviators. Earhart's chapter is titled "Amelia Earhart: She Dramatized Flying."

Author Jean Adams contends that Earhart's career

"has already been so completely revealed there is little left to say. For this reason we shall content ourselves here with highlighting a few spots in her meteoric life. Those who are curious to know more about Amelia Earhart must turn to both her own books and those of her husband, George Palmer Putnam."²¹

The book is written for older children, told matter-of-factly, but interestingly. The authors conclude that "today, therefore, it is very hard to decide whether Amelia Earhart was the greatest woman flier of her day or merely the greatest personality of her sex who ever flew."²²

The second Earhart book is devoted only to her life, *Amelia Earhart: Heroine of the Skies*.²³

It is told in a novel-like fashion with liberties taken in dialogue and frequent editorial comments. Earhart's family life and personal shortcomings are shortchanged, but still, it is an interesting read. The book includes a bibliography with author, year, and title only, contains an index, and is the first biography on Earhart I've found with a chronology.

The third title, *Amelia Earhart: Kansas Girl*, is part of the Childhood of Famous Americans series. Only thirty books in the 199-book series were about women. The Baldwin collection owns sixteen. Besides Earhart, they include Jane Addams, Sacagawea, Julia Ward Howe, Clara Barton, Pocahontas, Martha Washington, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Juliette Low, Lucretia Mott, Maria Mitchell, Molly Pitcher, Susan Anthony, Jessie Fremont, Dolly Madison, and Elizabeth Blackwell.

Like other books of its time, these are written in novel-like fashion, in a rather gushy, sappy, and dramatized style. The authors took liberties with dialogue, sanitized or ignored negative issues or character traits, and played up individualism, yet carefully retained their subject's sense of femininity and religious devotion. A scene from Amelia's first sight of a plane at a fair will illustrate the style:

Amelia stopped again. "Look at the beautiful paper hats, Papa. May we have one?"



"Oh, yes, Papa. Please!" Pidge [Amelia's sister] echoed.

"If you'll promise then to come with me to see the aeroplane with no more delay. I'll get you each one," Papa said.

Amelia and Pidge tried first one hat, then another. There were flat little circles covered with paper flowers. They tied under the chin with silk ribbons. There were bright bonnets with flower-trimmed brims. They were all so gay and pretty. It seemed wise to try each one on the counter. It was hard to make a choice . . .

"Will it fly again today, Papa?" asked Amelia.

"If the rain stops. But we'd better go home."

"Let's wait and see it fly again," Amelia begged. "Did you hear the whir of the engine? Did you see the wings tip like a bird's? I'd like to see it again."

Papa looked at her in surprise. "For a little girl who would rather ride the ponies or buy a paper hat, you've changed in a hurry, Melia."

"I just didn't understand about aeroplanes. I didn't know they would be so exciting. I'd rather see it than anything else at the fair."²⁴

No references are listed in the series, but often the author printed an acknowledgment at the beginning of the book noting people or written materials consulted. They all contain a chronology and an index and are illustrated with black-and-white sketches, which are listed near the table of

contents. Early chapters establish the biographee's personality while the final chapter sums up her life's work. The books are amazingly similar in style and content, considering that they have differing authors, who all happen to be women.

Incidentally, fourteen of the original books are currently being reissued as the Young Patriots series published by Patria Press; four of them have female subjects, including one about Earhart. They retain the original authors, but employ new illustrators. Amazingly little has changed in the writing; a few portions have been shortened or given more modern language, others elaborated on, and some paragraphs made more politically correct. In a few instances, whole chapters have been omitted. For example, a chapter titled "Pioneers and Indians" in Earhart's book was left out. Another chapter in her book was changed from "Girl Pilot" to "Real Pilot" and two sections, "What Happened Next?" and "The Mystery of

Amelia Earhart,” were substituted for the final chapter. Other books in the series added afterwards, chronologies, and glossaries.

The two biographies of Earhart in the Baldwin Collection written in the mid-twentieth century did not vary much from earlier works. *The Story of Amelia Earhart* by Adele de Leeu (1955) read much like the Howe books from the Childhood of Famous Americans series, only longer, with more details. And the second, written in 1962 by John Parlin, is a poorly written early reader, part of the Discovery Book series. It has full-page black, white, tan, and turquoise illustrations, and is only a barely serviceable title.

Two picturebooks present new layouts for telling today’s readers about Earhart. In the first, Cynthia Chin-Lee’s 2005 book *Amelia to Zora: Twenty-Six Women Who Changed the World*, the alphabet book format begins with Earhart. Chin-Lee notes that she alphabetized by the women’s given names, as last names usually represent father’s or husband’s names. The entries for Amelia and the others—some famous, others not—each give a blurb of informative text, a quotation, and a collage portrait.

The second picturebook, Shelley Tanaka’s 2008 book *Amelia Earhart: The Legend of the Lost Aviator*, is a melding of many presentations of Earhart’s life. It is a longer picturebook that combines captioned photos, full-page paintings, sidebars of additional stories, timelines, and varied layouts and background colors. The text is told as a story, but is very factual and finishes with an epilogue about the various theories of her disappearance, a bibliography of books (including her own and her husband’s), articles, websites, source notes, photography credits, and an index. These two titles present the world of Earhart to children in a far different fashion from the fictionalized narratives from the early to middle 1900s.

As Helen Keller said, “Life is either a daring adventure, or nothing at all.”²⁵ And what an adventure biographies for children are today! Those titles from the earliest days of books for children have paved the way for the gems we can offer girls today. I’ve decided to never miss an opportunity to do so.

Yes, you’ll never believe the women I’ve met:

- *Mary Ann Bickerdyke as she nursed her “boys” in the field during the Civil War;*
- *Marian Anderson as she closed her eyes and sang from her heart in front of the Lincoln Memorial, having been denied entrance into Constitution Hall;*
- *Bella Abzug grilling another member of Congress to make a political point;*
- *Aretha Franklin singing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the 1968 Democratic National Convention;*
- *Billie Jean King historically defeating Bobby Riggs in a “Battle of the Sexes” tennis match;*
- *Maria Tallchief as she performed in Swan Lake with the New York City Ballet;*
- *Rachel Carson as she studied the effects of DDT on the environment;*
- *Corazon Aquino as she took the presidential oath of office in the Philippines;*
- *Winnie Mandela as she addressed a huge rally of the African National Congress while her husband was still imprisoned and she was a banned person . . .* 📖

The Bechtel Experience

In 2006 and 2007, while serving on the ALSC Notable Children’s Books Committee, one of my fellow committee members won the Bechtel Fellowship. I was awed and intrigued, and upon questioning her, I discovered that it’s the opportunity of a lifetime—four weeks of reading, study, contemplation, and writing about historic children’s books in the Baldwin Collection at the University of Florida at Gainesville.

I waited until the timing was right for me and my family, applied, and won! The proposed study was a no-brainer for me—as you see, I’m a child born in the late 1950s into a very poor rural farm family. Being child number eight out of nine, and a girl, the opportunities in life seemed very limited. So a study of biographies for children was a natural fit.

The four weeks flew by. I was thrilled to see the stacks of the collection, get acquainted with the helpful staff, and become oriented to the catalog system. After talking with curator Rita Smith about the collection, I narrowed my search to a chronological search of women’s biographies only, with a mini-study of books on Amelia Earhart, a special interest of mine.

There was much more available than I could ever read, but I was able to study the most pertinent and interesting. I’ve put the experience to work in several ways: by writing this article, giving professional presentations, strengthening my biography collection, and sharing with my university students. I also plan to begin a Heroes Book Club for at-risk students at my school.

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