

# Biographies: Bringing Lives to Life

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Biographies make the world come alive for children and are a significant genre in the classroom and in publishing. Reading about the lives of others engages children and helps them see connections to their own lives and to

the past. The 2009 CLA Workshop, sponsored by the Children's Literature Assembly of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), included a panel of eminent biographers and illustrators who discussed their research and writing processes and afforded the audience an intimate view of their creative processes in action. Speakers included Russell Freedman, Candace Fleming and her editor, Anne Schwartz, illustrator Shadra Strickland, Deborah Hopkinson, Gene Barretta, and Kathleen Krull.

As the day unfolded, three common themes could be found among the speakers. All presenters revealed the need to become close to their subjects through an immersion in research. For some, this entailed visiting actual locations and sites where the subjects lived. Second, finding a format or illustrative technique that allowed their work to take on its own distinctive style was of paramount importance. Finally, all revealed the necessity to persevere over time, continually revising their work in order to create an effective final product. A brief profile of each presentation follows.

## RUSSELL FREEDMAN

Beginning the day was Russell Freedman, recipient of the Newbery Award for *Lincoln: A Photobiography* (1987), and author of numerous other award-winning books such as *Washington at Valley Forge* (2008), *The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (2004), and *Confucius: The Golden Rule* (2002). The allure of a good biography, he notes,

comes from our ability as readers to learn about our own lives and gain insights into human behavior. He commented that writing biographies mirrors aspects of 'falling in love' and remarked, "It is more like being married. You live with the subject for a long time. You know what attracted you, but the subject changes and you learn things that you do not anticipate." Since no one's life can be truly re-created on paper, one has to probe into the smallest aspects of life that allow the person to become real in all of his/her idiosyncrasies. For example in *Lincoln*, Freedman offers his audience a perspective into Lincoln's character by sharing anecdotes from his law partner, William Herndon. According to Herndon, Lincoln was "the most secretive – reticent – shut-mouthed man that ever lived."

One technique that Freedman uses for bringing subjects to life is to include small but telling details that help the character become real. For example, Freedman remarked that Lincoln was fond of saying "Howdy" and "Stay-a spell" to his company, and much to his wife's consternation, he loved to greet diplomats at the door in his slippers.

Using details, such as emptying Lincoln's pockets after his assassination, affords the reader an intimate perspective:

The morning he died, Lincoln had in his pockets a pair of small spectacles folded into a silver case; a small velvet eyeglass cleaner; a large linen handkerchief with A. Lincoln stitched in red; an

ivory pocketknife trimmed with silver; and a brown leather wallet lined with purple silk. The wallet contained a Confederate five-dollar bill bearing the likeness of Jefferson Davis and eight newspaper clippings, all of which praised him. As president, he had been denounced, ridiculed, and damned by legions of critics. When he saw an article that complemented him, he often kept it. (1987, p. 130)

Another technique Freedman uses is to share quotes and anecdotes from authentic diaries and memoirs to take the place of dialog and give the reader a sense of reality and a visualization of the individual person. He found a quote by Lincoln's law partner that talked of Lincoln's inability to discipline his boys. Herndon complained:

If they pulled down all the books from the shelves, bent the points of all the pens, overturned the spittoon, it never disturbed the serenity of their father's good nature. I have felt many and many a time that I wanted to wring the necks of those little brats and pitch them out of the windows. (1987, p. 41)

In doing his research, Freedman finds nothing compares to visiting actual places and seeing firsthand the setting and locale. At times on these journeys, he can almost feel the spirit of the person he is researching coming through. For example, when visiting the village of Qufu in China, where Confucius spent most of his life some 2500 years ago, Freedman revealed that he got the distinct feeling that his subject was "...rattling the page and looking me in the eyes." As he traveled to this remote village, it struck him that having no airport or train station had kept the village somewhat unchanged. He wondered if what he was seeing was similar to what Confucius saw as he stood in the exact spot.

Although Freedman relates that there is no one method for writing a biography, he feels this art form needs a dose of "serendipity" along with intensive documentation and research to get it right. As he was researching for his text, *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (1990), he had a chance meeting with his attorney who asked what he was currently working on. When the attorney was told it was Roosevelt (FDR), he reported that one of his clients, Curtis, was FDR's grandson. Freedman was able to meet with Curtis personally and in the process

learned intimate stories about life in the White House and also about FDR.

Even though Freedman's work has received numerous prestigious awards, he related that praise from his readers is sweet and some of his best rewards come from the children's fan letters. He ended his speech with a favorite fan letter that says it all:

Dear Mr. Freedman,

I read your book of Abe Lincoln...Did you take the photographs yourself?

Russell's work made Lincoln real to this young reader. That is the best accolade a writer could receive.

#### CANDACE FLEMING AND ANNE SCHWARTZ

Candace Fleming is a respected author of the Horn Book-Boston Globe award-winning *The Lincolns: A Scrapbook Look at Abraham and Mary* (2008) and the new *The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P.T. Barnum* (2009). She presented with her editor, Anne Schwartz, of Schwartz and Wade Books, an imprint of Random House. They began their presentation by describing their collaborative processes. On Fleming's acknowledgements page for the *Lincolns*, she thanks "the indomitable Anne Schwartz, a woman who can find the perfect solution to any dilemma." This close editor/writer relationship was evident as Fleming and Schwartz began to banter back and forth in an informal discussion about their writer/editor work process.

Fleming began by discussing the journey into her book, *Ben Franklin's Almanac: Being a True Account of the Good Gentleman's Life* (2003). She recalled wanting to get away from the regular narrative in chronological order and address big themes on Ben. Fleming sent Schwartz her first chapter and admitted that she was told to "Start Over!" She rewrote the first chapter four times, rearranging presentation and working with how to organize the book. She finally landed upon the scrapbook format.

Schwartz remarked that she was the ideal editor for this type of book as she had disliked studying history when in school because she thought the content was boring. She was intrigued by this scrapbook format and stated, "Connecting text to images, the idea that a reader could open the book and read a bit without reading the whole book was very appealing to me."

In talking about how they came to focus on both Abraham and Mary for the *Lincoln* text, Fleming showed a slide with some of her source notes that formed a stack reaching to the ceiling. As she collected, sorted and perused data, she realized how integral Mary's story was and how it gave a new perspective of history. Fleming agreed with Freedman's comment that Mary had such an amazing formal education and was often the most educated person in a room full of men. Fleming stated, "I think she was maligned, and I wanted to put her back into the historical record. In her family, she was encouraged to talk to people if she had an educated opinion. So imagine having to shut your mouth with diplomats and elected officials in the White House."

Schwartz related that Freedman's book on Lincoln is iconic and also admitted that there were more books written about Lincoln than anyone, but the Abe and Mary book idea was new. Thus, the focus of the book would be on sharing both lives, and Fleming went to work.

The process of creating a book is challenging for both author and editor. As an author with so much information, Fleming found that she was having challenges knowing how she wanted to organize and put it together. Schwartz suggested she try an outline. Fleming described her process of physically laying out each chapter, placing the snippets of history beside the photographs as they would appear on the actual page. These pages then became 'her map' and she was finally ready to send the manuscript to Schwartz, who said, "It was the LONGEST manuscript I have EVER received!"

As Fleming read through the response letter from Schwartz, she could read between the lines. Her editor's comments stating that it was "an insightful, brilliant, fascinating...and LONG manuscript sent back to you for cutting" made Fleming face the idea that she might have to start completely over, which was a crushing idea. Schwartz added, "My thought process was that I was really scared to tell her that I couldn't publish it. It was too long with too much stuff. I thought I might have to lose Candy."

The role of a good editor, Schwartz revealed, is to encourage, ask questions, make suggestions to try something else and try to help authors problem solve. Although she was asking Fleming to cut, she also saw

things to be added: The Civil War for one thing! Sharing recipes for cake and what was eaten at a specific meal were those small details that made characters real, yet ignoring the war probably wouldn't work. One comment from this first letter had Schwartz asking Fleming how she 'knew' what the characters were feeling. "You say he was lonely. Is this a fact?"

As Fleming went back to the drawing board, she kept thinking about how she wanted to write a book that kids could connect to. It took her an entire year to revise and resend the manuscript. Schwartz said, "My letter walks a fine line, as I know she gets to a place where she gets stubborn. By this second letter, I encourage, tell her to roll up her sleeves and get to work." In this letter, Schwartz was still asking how Fleming knew thoughts and feeling of characters and was interested in the relationship of illustrations and text. She also wanted to see an entry on Frederick Douglass, whom she saw as a bit more important than a cake recipe that had been placed in the text. Fleming added a section on Douglass but also kept the recipe for the cake.

At this point in the writing process, Fleming was able to review big questions and realized she was still struggling with how to deal with the Civil War. She was two years into the research/writing process and still needed to work on the battles: who were the opposing forces and what was their significance to the events, the analysis, and of course, the Gettysburg Address. Research helped her gain ground, but it was an arduous task taking three more years to complete. The manuscript was sent to scholars for fact checking, and, due to the labor intensive scrapbook design, a freelance copy editor and designer were also brought into the process. After the galley had been sent to Kirkus Reviews, Schwartz revealed that they had an intense moment of anguish when the reviewer caught an error; one caption had part of a sentence dropped, which changed the intended meaning. Schwartz quickly wrote letters to award committee members so they would know the error had been caught and would be fixed in reprint. Kirkus gave the book a starred review.

As they concluded their talk, both author and editor agreed that their work on the Lincolns' biography had been a harrowing—and rewarding—journey, and that this scrapbook format was challenging to accomplish for both of them. However, due to its success, they are

already planning to tackle another again in the near future.

SHADRA STRICKLAND

Shadra Strickland, recipient of the 2009 Coretta Scott King/John Steptoe Award for New Talent and also of the Ezra Jack Keats New Illustrator Award for *Bird* (Elliot, 2008), offered an illustrator's perspective on the bookmaking process. Strickland's background includes studying design, illustration and writing at Syracuse University and earning her M.F.A. from New York's School of Visual Arts. She currently holds dual roles, working two days a week at Bloomsbury Publishers as a designer and also freelancing as an artist/illustrator. She is a contributing illustrator to *Our Children Can Soar: A Celebration of Rosa, Barack, and the Pioneers of Change* (Cook, 2009).

Strickland began her slide show by discussing her work on the text, *Our Children Can Soar* (2009). The book is not pure biography but includes spare text highlighting historical African American 'pioneers of change' leading up to Barack Obama's run for the presidency. Strickland remarked on how honored she felt to be invited to illustrate a figure within this book alongside such exceptional company as James Ransome, Bryan Collier, and Diane and Leo Dillon.

Each illustrator was given three choices of historical figures to select from, and Strickland was awarded Ruby Bridges. She only had two lines of text to illustrate but dug into the research. Strickland discovered information about Ruby's parents and how the day she entered the all-white elementary school in New Orleans traumatized the young girl. People screamed at Ruby and some carried coffins, which made her stop eating. While working with a child psychologist, Ruby's drawings showed people with missing limbs. Strickland found herself 'walking in Ruby's shoes' and worked to create an image that not only captured the physical realities of this historical event but also revealed both Ruby's inner emotional turmoil and hope. She began drawing a variety of thumbnail sketches, one showing people yelling at the child as she got out of the car. Strickland believed Ruby was probably happy in the beginning, going to a new school, so she illustrated her with butterflies and light.

Strickland's final illustration shows a six-year-old girl looking scared but hopeful, clutching her satchel

and book and quietly walking between two giant marshals standing guard at the school door. Inside, one can see a sparse hallway with a portrait of John F. Kennedy, a piece of history that Strickland was inspired to add although Kennedy wasn't actually president at the time. She commented that through her research, she absorbed inspiration from a variety of sources such as Norman Rockwell's famous portrait of this scene and John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie* (1962).

Strickland's next slide showed her cover illustration for Zetta Elliot's text entitled *Bird* (2008). The main character, Makhai, better known as Bird, uses drawing to help him cope with his all-too-real life in Harlem that involves dealing with the loss of a beloved grandfather and an older brother's addiction to drugs. Strickland wanted her illustrations to move away from "making the story maudlin and monstrous." She wanted to portray the character with strength and resilience. Having been influenced by artists such as Ben Shahn, a famous artist known for his unique use of symbolism, Strickland enjoys adding symbolic elements to her own work. In the story, Bird's older brother, Marcus, is a talented graffiti artist but becomes absorbed into the world of drugs. In the beginning, Strickland's illustrations show Marcus's face only, before his addiction; afterwards, he is always cast in shadow, and the reader does not see his face—her deliberate choice.

Strickland described examples of her use of mixed media, using water color to give a wispy, hopeful emotional tone to the book and choosing to share Bird's drawings by using ball point pen. To get to know her characters, she, like Freedman, likes to visit actual locales for the book and walk around in her character's shoes, so for days she spent time walking the streets in Harlem taking pictures and sketching. She drew line drawings on location, and was able to scan most of them, which allowed her to then trace over some of them to use in her final artwork. Her symbolism is also noted in this text as she shows a silhouetted, falling-apart building in Harlem set against a peaceful blue sky as her backdrop to show the contrast in the two brothers: one full of hope and dreams as he stretched out arms to view the sky and one caught in shadows and the hopelessness of addiction.

Strickland pledged the audience to secrecy as she displayed illustrations from her newest project, *A Place Where Hurricanes Happen* by Rene Watson (2010). The

book is about four neighborhood friends, before, during, and after Hurricane Katrina. Strickland admitted that conducting the research for this project was an emotional journey. She once again went on location to feel close to the characters she was creating and to feel the textures, smells, and sounds of New Orleans. As she began to sketch she also drew heavily on the work of David Bates and Willie Burch who had documented the events of Katrina.

Strickland is currently working on a new book called *White Water*, a work of historical fiction that is due out in June 2010. Although she remarked that she'd never had an interest in illustrating this genre, she is up for a new challenge. Strickland is currently planning to move back home to Atlanta and begin illustrating full time. She hopes to be inspired by both changes in her life, stating, "Why not live it a bit bigger and see what happens?"

#### DEBORAH HOPKINSON

Deborah Hopkinson is an award-winning author known for such books as *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* (1994), *Stagecoach Sal* (2008), named one of *Publishers Weekly's* Best Books for 2009, *Keep On! The Story of Matthew Henson, Co-Discoverer of the North Pole* (2009), winner of the 2009 Eloise Jarvis McGraw Oregon Book Award, and *Home on the Range: John A. Lomax and His Cowboy Songs* (2009), a Junior Library Guild Selection. Deborah's ability to illuminate lives through historical fiction and biographies engages readers and sparks their interest to learn more.

One of her goals is to expand the field by writing about ordinary and lesser-known people in history such as Jubilee singer Ella Sheppard Moore in *A Band of Angels* (1999), an ALA Notable book; Lincoln's playmate, Austin Gollaher, in *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek* (2008); and apple grower Henderson Luelling in *Apples to Oregon* (2004), winner of the Golden Kite Award for picture book text, the Comstock award, and the Time of Wonder Award.

When visiting schools, Hopkinson has several goals in mind. First, she reviews differences between historical fiction and nonfiction. As new memoirs and creative nonfiction have come onto the scene, she believes this is an important differentiation to make.

Hopkinson has always enjoyed reading history and strives to help readers challenge the notion that history

is boring and to question whether the way history is recorded is the way things actually occurred. Examining who belongs in history is an issue Deborah delves into with young audiences. Having been drawn to history as a young girl, she often wondered where the women were in history texts.

Hopkinson loves to use historical fiction for its power to illuminate real lives caught up in a decisive moment in time. She encourages readers to go beyond the surface and to read between the lines and ask questions of historical fiction. She uses one of her newest texts, *Stagecoach Sal* (2008), as an example of this strategy. On the surface, *Stagecoach Sal* is an outlandish story about an imagined conflict with a bandit known as Poetic Pete. Between the lines, however, she connects the story to historical events and figures; Poetic Pete to the real bandit, Black Bart, and Sal to the real Della Rawson, the first girl to drive the stage coach and deliver the mail.

In another text, *Home on the Range* (2009), which is based upon the life of John A. Lomax, the first man to collect and publish American Folk Songs, she again asks readers to look beyond the surface of this engaging story about a man who liked to collect cowboy songs. Between the lines, John Lomax questioned the accepted notions of who and what belongs in history. It is due to John Lomax's research that today we have both recorded and written records of American cowboy songs and ballads such as "Git Along, Little Dogies," "Sweet Betsy from Pike" and "Home on the Range."

In *Keep On! The Story of Mathew Henson* (2009), Hopkinson tells the story of Matthew Henson, an African American explorer who was part of the historical 1909 journey to the North Pole with Admiral Robert Peary. Again, she considered that the story shares one boy's dream of adventure and his journey in becoming an explorer but between the lines, the text is a way to connect to the real life story of an African American hero left out of history for many years.

For this book, Hopkinson believed it important to include an extensive afterword that includes a timeline of events, photo of Henson, and websites and resources to allow her readers opportunities to connect and find out more about this explorer on their own. While engaged in research, she too found those serendipitous moments discussed by Russell Freedman within Henson's life story. After the sea captain who had taken him on as a cabin boy died, Matthew was left to find

new employment. It was while working in a hat shop in Washington that he met and went to work for Captain Robert Peary, which began their 20-year relationship. Unlike Peary, Henson became fluent in the Inuit language, was well liked by the Inuit tribe, and was an invaluable member of expedition team. However, upon his return to America, his role as an explorer was virtually forgotten, and he had difficulty finding a job.

Hopkinson concluded by sharing her passion for bringing characters like Lomax and Henson to life for readers. When asked how she is able to work full-time for a university and continue to be such a prolific writer, she remarked that she has lots of help, including a husband who likes to cook!

#### GENE BARRETTA

Gene Barretta holds a B.F.A. in Film Studies from New York University and has worked for many years in film and television production. He has also illustrated several children's books and is currently using his talents as both author and illustrator in *Now and Ben: The Modern Inventions of Benjamin Franklin* (2006) and *Neo-Leo: The Ageless Ideas of Leonardo da Vinci* (2009). He shared with the audience that, with every book, he hopes to educate while also entertaining readers.

Unlike some illustrators who like to craft the action before a climax, Barretta enjoys going straight to the story's climax. He also takes pleasure in modeling characters in his illustrations after people he knows. In *Now and Ben*, he used family members on his mother's side as models for side characters, and for *Neo Leo* he used members from his dad's side of the family. He also incorporated a character resembling Paul McCartney just for fun.

Perseverance in revising and changing manuscripts was a theme shared throughout

Barretta's speech. In *Now and Ben* (2006), Barretta knew that he wanted to represent how the past connects to present day. Growing up in Yardley, Pennsylvania, he was able to "spend time with Ben" by frequenting his neighborhood, digging into the firsthand research, and reading a variety of biographies including Fleming's book, *Ben Franklin's Almanac: Being a True Account of the Good Gentleman's Life* (2003). As he read, he was trying to figure out how to approach his subject in a new format. He first chose to go with a narrative form. Editors enjoyed it but wanted a different format. Dis-

couraged, but using the feedback, he tried again and again. For his third attempt, he made a mock up using a few colors, but this was rejected as well. He even had one version featuring Ben Franklin's ghost, but again, it was rejected. Barretta decided to abandon the idea of narrative and center on Ben's famous inventions by using a split screen format: one page showing his invention as it looked and was used in his day and the other screen showing modern applications. This revision process took two solid years, but in December 2004, his manuscript was finally accepted.

Once a manuscript is accepted, Barretta begins work on the illustrations. He starts with the person and event and expands what is being said in the text through his drawings. For example, the cobblestones under Ben's feet on the front cover show a variety of different titles representing Ben such as humanitarian, inventor, and musician. As Barretta continues to work on accuracy of details, he spends more time visiting specific locales and putting in new symbolic details to visually pull the reader into Ben's world, such as in the opening scene showing Ben's family in windows of their house. His son William is framed by window panes resembling bars, denoting his time spent in jail, and a black raven can be seen peering in the window and looking at his young son Francis who died at the age of 4.

For his next book, *Neo Leo: The Ageless Ideas of Leonardo da Vinci* (2009), Barretta again decided that he wanted to depict Leonardo using a similar split screen format. After looking at a variety of books on his subject and experimenting with what were the most important parts of his life, Barretta began to focus on all of Leonardo's notes about his inventions. The author thought the fact that none of Leonardo's inventions was created during his lifetime but helped foreshadow modern inventions was remarkable and something he wanted to pursue for his book. He shared that the reason Leonardo was not able to bring any of his inventions to life was due to financial issues and also that many ideas were too controversial. In the opening pages, Leo is in the corner observing and taking notes as he absorbs the world around him. Barretta added another element to the first two-page spread by incorporating people from Leonardo's famous paintings, including the Mona Lisa looking out a window as she eats a bowl of spaghetti.

Leonardo observed nature to inspire his inventions, and Barretta added this nature connection to each illus-

tration. In one illustration, Leo is shown bending down to observe plant seeds moving in a vortex through streams, and Leo's notes share how he is relating this vortex to how blood travels through the heart. On the opposite page, Baretta shows the modern imaging technology that reveals how blood moving through the heart forms a vortex that opens and closes the valves. The illustration for this page also adds humor as a group of doctors, curiously resembling the Three Stooges, are doing heart surgery with one doctor holding a hammer as a way to 'anesthetize' his patient. Baretta inserted Leo's notes written using his famous backward handwriting to accompany the illustrations of Leo's inventions. When doing research on Leonardo and his custom of writing backwards, Baretta read differing conclusions; one being that Leo may have done this to keep notes secret, but others have hypothesized that it may have been simply due to his being left-handed and not wanting to smear the ink as he wrote across the page left to right.

Baretta ended his talk by revealing that he enjoyed approaching the biographical details of these two inventors in his own unique format. He hopes to encourage readers to get excited about these two men and their inventions—inventions that have influenced people's lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As an illustrator, he continues to be diligent about presenting historical details correctly and hopes that one of these small details might initiate an interesting conversation and spark an interest in learning more about these two important historical figures.

#### KATHLEEN KRULL

The final presenter was prominent biographer Kathleen Krull, known for the highly acclaimed *Lives of...* series such as *Lives of the Presidents: Fame, Shame, and What the Neighbors Thought* (1998). Her engaging writing spans diverse content areas, including music, art, and athletics.

Krull discussed one of her newest titles, *The Boy Who Invented TV: The Story of Philo Farnsworth* (2009). Because Krull likes to find people who have been neglected in history, Philo Farnsworth's story was a perfect fit. To 'hook' her audience, she began this biography by sharing "Life before Philo" where there were no movies, no radios (except those used by the military), and no television. Philo was a boy with an insatiable curios-

ity that led him to question anything of a mechanical nature. He poured through old *Popular Science* magazines and read about electricity, magnetism, the first radios, and articles describing ideas about something called a television that might someday be able to send pictures as well as sounds. At the young age of 14 while plowing a field, Philo was inspired by the parallel rows behind his plow and could envision how he could 'make pictures fly through the air' by breaking picture images down into parallel lines and sending them via electricity. He was only 21 when he made his television, and Pem, his wife, was actually the first to be captured on TV. She was seen with her eyes closed, scratching her nose! Krull made the decision to end the text with Farnsworth's few moments of glory in the *San Francisco Chronicle*, highlighting this "young genius," but his battle with RCA for rights to his invention are shared in her author's notes. She related that his wife spent the rest of her life battling to see that Philo was given credit for this invention.

On becoming a writer, Krull remarked, "My whole life has been about books," as she recalled her childhood experiences. Dr. Seuss was a favorite author, and she credits his books for teaching her to read. She loved reading series books and also biographies, especially those about women. Krull would check out seven or eight books a week at her local library. At the age of 15, she began working at a local library but was fired for reading instead of shelving books!

Many positive school experiences built her self-confidence as a writer. Krull recalls copying and illustrating favorite poems in her elementary years and creating rhyming verses, much in the style of Dr. Seuss. Sister De Maria, her third-grade teacher, encouraged and praised these early writings. In fifth grade, she was obsessed with hair and wrote a story entitled, *Hairdos and People I Know*. "I'd write my own blurbs...The best book about hair that you ever read!" This self-expression was powerful. Krull started keeping a diary in sixth grade and found the ability to write about anything to be exhilarating. When given an assignment to study a word, she decided to research the etymology of the word *gossip*. Krull finds this to be coincidental since *gossip* is now a major part of her work.

Krull discussed one of her most popular series, the *Lives of...* series, which includes six books with the seventh, *Lives of the Pirates*, coming out in 2010. For this

series, her hook is to take famous people, preferably dead, and think about what the neighbors thought about them. She finds anecdotes about “what they liked to eat” and “how they wore their hair” that allow readers to see them as real people. In doing research for *Lives of the Presidents* (1998), she uncovered that Victoria Woodhull had run against Grant for president. This little-known story deserved to be part of history and became the subject of her book, *A Woman for President: The Story of Victoria Woodhull* (2006). As she unearthed more accounts of Victoria’s life, Krull discovered that although Woodhull’s candidacy was considered a joke, she actually held her own convention with over 600 delegates attending.

For *The Boy on Fairfield Street: How Ted Geisel Grew Up to Become Dr. Seuss* (2004) Krull researched Geisel’s life, his accomplishments, his inspirations, how teachers treated him, and what made him Dr. Seuss. He stated that everything he wrote about happened on Fairfield Street, so Krull decided to concentrate on his early years of life for this text. She chose another subject, *Houdini: World’s Greatest Mystery Man and Escape King* (2007), because she knew kids were fascinated by this man’s life. She collaborated with Shadra Strickland, who was the book designer on this title. Several of Krull’s books revolve around music, her minor in college. *Lives of the Musicians* became her first in her highly acclaimed series that she worked on with illustrator Kathryn Hewitt. Kathleen has also written biographies about Wilma Rudolph, *Wilma Unlimited* (1996) and Cesar Chavez, *Harvesting Hope* (2003), to highlight their incredible accomplishments for today’s children. Her *Giants of Science* is a series for older readers and concentrates on famous scientists, their work at the time, and their eccentricities.

When Krull begins writing about a person, she researches and reviews the competition to find what has already been published. She has an extensive library that she continually feeds with new books and remains a “heavy user of the library.” At times, Krull finds that she writes as she’s doing research, but at other times, she needs to read and absorb before getting on the computer. Krull doesn’t start at one point in a person’s life or do her research in a linear fashion. She continually searches for “the arc of a person’s life.” As she continues this process, she reads and reviews until patterns form and she finds information repeated.

Kathleen concluded her speech by confiding that her editors are also good about sending long, long letters of problems to fix. Her immediate response is to get up from the computer, do some jumping jacks or go play in her pool. She then makes her way back to the computer where she continues the revision process.

#### CONCLUSION

Workshop participants at the 2009 CLA Workshop on biographies enjoyed learning about the creative processes and all of the “behind the scenes” work that goes into writing, illustrating, and editing a biography. All attendees took away a heightened understanding of what it takes to create stories that capture the essence of a character and make that person come to life.

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