

Exploring Heart and Hope with Biographies: The 2024 Expert Class

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The 2024 Expert Class, sponsored by the Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA), featured members of The Biography Clearinghouse, an affiliated project of CLA.

SINCE 1994, the Children’s Literature Assembly (CLA) has sponsored the Expert Class at the annual NCTE Annual Convention. Providing cross-pollination between scholars, educators, authors, illustrators, editors, and publishers, the class invites attendees to engage in conversations and activities with panelists and one another.

The 2024 NCTE Annual Convention’s theme of “Heart, Hope, and Humanity” was an ideal opportunity to illuminate the work of The Biography Clearinghouse during the Expert Class. Since the advent of the Common Core State Standards over a decade ago, the role of biography and nonfiction in elementary and middle school classrooms has been discussed, debated, and expanded (Crisp et al., 2021; Dawes et al., 2019; Graff & Shimek, 2020; National Council of Teachers of English, 2023; Shimek & Dawes, 2023; Sanders, 2018; Yenika-Agbaw et al., 2018) against a backdrop of “a golden age” of nonfiction that continues to offer child, tween, and teen readers an ever-expanding array of well-researched, beautifully rendered, and thought-provoking books on a diverse range of people, topics, experiences, events, and natural phenomena (Baker, 2021; Brechner, 2016; Giblin, 2000; Gill, 2009; Issacs, 2011).

In 2019, a group of CLA members joined children’s biographers Barb Rosenstock, author of picturebook biographies such as *Otis and Will Discover the Deep: Record-Setting Dive of the Bathysphere* (2018) and

The Secret Kingdom: Nek Chand, a Changing India, and a Hidden World of Art (2018), and Tonya Bolden, author of picturebook and long-form biographies such as *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl* (2005) and *Facing Frederick: The Life of Frederick Douglass, a Monumental American Man* (2018), to develop what they called “The Biography Clearinghouse,” a website to amplify the potential of biographies in K–8 classrooms. The CLA board approved the Clearinghouse as a sponsored project at the 2019 NCTE Convention. Working from home across two continents in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the team created an open-access site. The Biography Clearinghouse website champions the power and potential of biographies to do a variety of things: diversify the curriculum, develop reading and writing skills, support in-depth explorations of content, model disciplinary practices in science and social studies and the integrated arts, and foster social-emotional learning.

The Clearinghouse sees picturebooks, early readers, and long-form biographies as generative vehicles to diversify the K–8 curriculum, asserting that they “reveal the diversity of people who have helped to shape government, the arts, science, sports, industry, and entertainment. Biographies also infuse the language arts, science, social studies, math, and integrated arts curriculum with models of agency and perseverance” (The Biogra-

phy Clearinghouse, 2025b). High-quality biographies for young people offer educators and students opportunities for engaged explorations of the contributions of diverse individuals and groups over time.

Educators can envision a more expansive and versatile role for diverse biographies outside of the traditional biography genre study. The Biography Clearinghouse lists the following ways in which biographies can support student learning:

- Biography is a powerful genre for fostering students' reading and writing identities.
- Biography serves as a model for narrative thinking.
- Biographies can be used to support students' growth in reading comprehension.
- Biographies allow us to consider the role of the biographer and the evidence the biographer uses. In biography, authors build cases using evidence.
- Biographies serve as models for how authors and illustrators do research, through the information revealed in author and illustrator notes in both picturebook and chapter-length biographies. The Biography Clearinghouse advocates that publishers regularly include such back matter.
- Biography models language, stylistic choices, and literary elements in the same ways that other literary genres do.
- Biography models the importance of revision.
- Biographies are powerful tools for exploring visual literacy.
- Biographies can be a tool for critical literacy. Biographers make decisions about what to include, what to emphasize, and what to exclude, offering complex perspectives of people and examinations of power and privilege. (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b)

While not exhaustive, this list illustrates the many roles that biography can play in the English language arts curriculum and beyond.

To support educators and to make these curricular possibilities actionable, the Clearinghouse presents a three-part framework: Investigate, Explore, and Create (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b). In the "Investigate" stage, teachers and their students look closely at the craft of biography and the processes authors and illustrators use when researching and creating their books. The "Explore" stage capitalizes on the potential of biographies to offer important content learning, model disciplinary practices, and foster social-emotional learning. Finally, the "Create" stage invites young people

to create new texts and artifacts in response to the biographies they read, taking up the research, writing, and illustrative practices demonstrated by the book creators whose work they have studied.

To model what this work looks like, The Biography Clearinghouse offers specific examples for educators, with entries on picturebook, early reader, and long-form biographies. Each entry includes an interview with book creators; images of artifacts from the research, writing, and illustrating process; and a range of teaching ideas, all presented within the three-part framework structure.

Additionally, The Biography Clearinghouse helps educators stay current with picturebook biographies through a public Library Thing account (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025a). At the time this article was written, over three hundred and fifty picturebooks had been tagged for content, perspective, structure, and classroom purposes.

The Expert Class

The 2024 Expert Class began with an introduction to The Biography Clearinghouse by Expert Class chair and Biography Clearinghouse founding member Mary Ann Cappiello, who shared the goals of the Clearinghouse and the three-part framework. Four stages of roundtable discussions followed, with tables structured around the Clearinghouse's framework: one table for Investigate, two tables for Explore (one for Content/Disciplinary Thinking and another for Social-Emotional Learning), and one table for Create. Throughout the session, participants visited each table, engaging with both Biography Clearinghouse experts, fellow children's literature aficionados, and the core components of the framework.

INVESTIGATE THE TEXT

The first part of the Framework focuses on "the process and craft of creating biography" (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b)—the research, writing, and illustrative processes used by book creators, as well as the author's craft, the "word choices, writing style, evidence of accuracy, visual information provided, and organization" (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b). Author Barb Rosenstock and author and educator Scott Riley, of the American Singapore School, led this roundtable.

With a focus on the strength of story, the Investigate-themed roundtable guided participants to explore both the role of biography in the classroom and the joyful investigation that biography creators follow to bring biographical stories to life. While multiple titles were shared, much of the discussion explored the creation of *Otis and Will Discover the Deep: The Record-Setting Dive of the Bathysphere* (Rosenstock, 2018). This multiple award-winning picturebook tells the exciting story of Otis

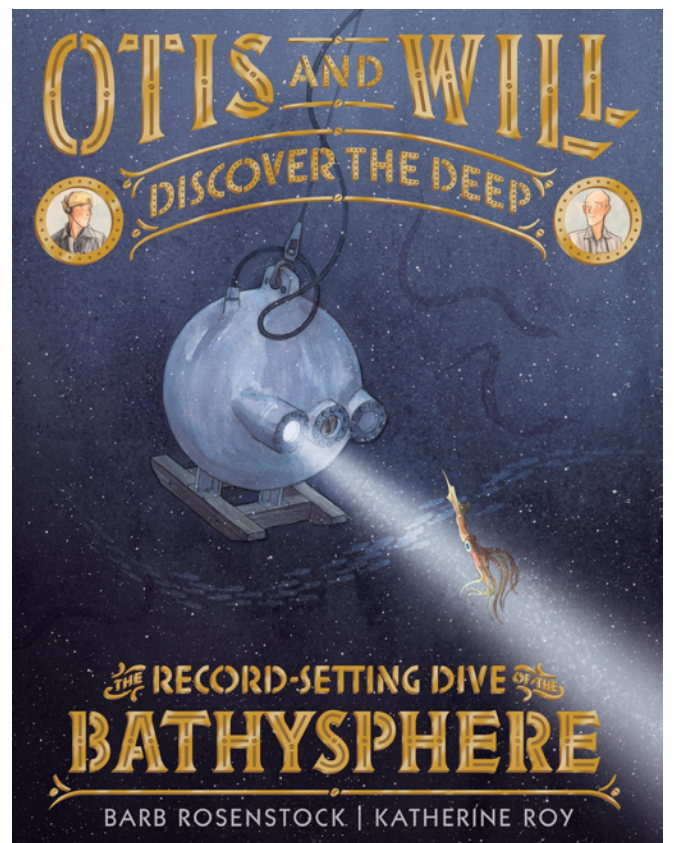
Barton and Will Beebe's record-setting expedition into the unknown depths of the sea in 1930.

Through an interview process, Riley engaged Rosenstock in a conversation that afforded session participants a peek into the creative process that is the core of the role of investigation in the Framework. Participants learned that when Rosenstock discovers something unique and special, like the hidden history of a 1930s voyage into the deep, her curiosity is sparked. She follows that twinkle of interest into a path of inquiry and discovery. As a biographer she works backward to find the human connection in the story, because "we connect to each other as humans first."

After the spark of wonder, Rosenstock begins her investigation process with a browser search that guides her to develop an understanding of the who and the what of this history. It was encouraging to hear that a simple search starts the quest for more knowledge. As her research continues, she immerses herself in the lives of the people she is writing about. In this investigation process, she engages with historical experts and materials to bring further depth to her understanding of someone's life story. Emphasizing the importance of essential research locations, Rosenstock notes the importance of place in the craft of her writing. Visiting homes, museums, libraries, and other locations related to her subjects allows her to experience their lives in a visceral manner. She reminded participants that online visits to these essential research locations are possible when an in-person visit is not.

For Rosenstock, the next part of her crafting process centers around structure. She works through a drafting process to find the right structure of the text that both reflects the story focus and the person she is highlighting. This "must do" component of her writing involves multiple structural possibilities that she works to narrow down with each draft. There are times that this process comes more easily than others. In fact, Rosenstock shared that she keeps a notebook close at hand, in case a once-elusive structure begins to reveal itself and she needs to capture it. In *Otis and Will Discover the Deep: The Record-Setting Dive of the Bathysphere* (Rosenstock, 2018), this structure came to her through the concept of depth. She was able to collaborate with the illustrator, Katherine Roy, and her publishing team to include an exciting gatefold that takes readers right into the depths of the sea with Otis and Will.

As the roundtable concluded, Rosenstock shared that "people are how I tell stories." Participants at this roundtable were drawn into the stories of research and investigation that bring strength, wonder, and authenticity to picturebook biographies.

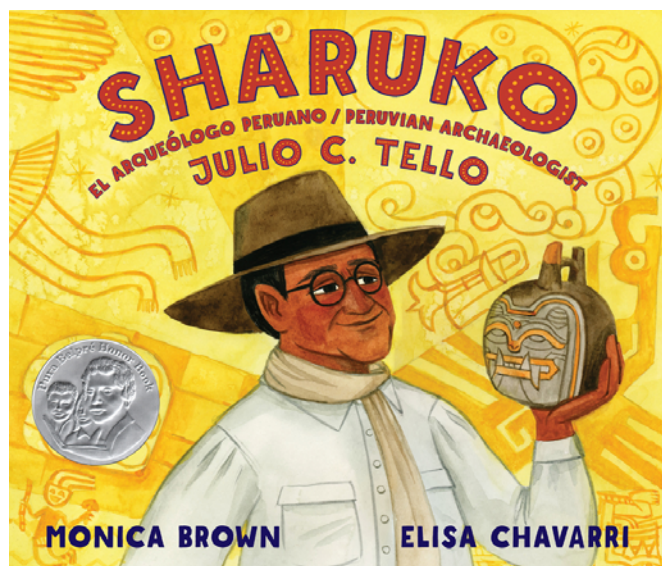


EXPLORE THE WORLD

Biographies help young people understand the world around them, and they also help young people understand how others have managed conflict, faced challenges, advocated for change, and persevered. At the Expert Class, two tables were used for “Explore”: one to focus on Content and Disciplinary Thinking, another to focus on Social-Emotional Learning.

CONTENT AND DISCIPLINARY THINKING. Because biographies provide content for readers to think about, they are a rich source of information to investigate in science and social studies units. More importantly, biographies introduce readers to the ways in which biographers and historians think about and create knowledge. Uncovering disciplinary literacy encourages readers to explore the ways in which people in a specific field think, read, write, and talk, as well as how they take action in the world (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b). Biographies thus support young people in investigating and understanding how we know what we know about the world. Amina Chaudhri, professor at Northeast Illinois University, led the discussion at this table.

This roundtable focused on Monica Brown, who is Peruvian American, and her immersion into the field of archaeology in her picturebook *Sharuko: El Arqueólogo Peruano/Peruvian Archaeologist Julio C. Tello* (2020), illustrated by Elisa Chavarri. *Sharuko* traces the life of Julio C. Tello (1880–1947), considered to be the founder of modern Peruvian archaeology, from his early interest in Peru’s ancient cultures to his rise as the most distinguished Indigenous social scientist of the twentieth century. A map and an afterword with additional information, photographs, and source list are included. Tello’s legacy includes the Museum of Anthropology in Lima,



Peru, that houses the artifacts he discovered and wrote about and his research on the history and accomplishments of Indigenous Peruvians that colonialism tried to erase.

Chaudhri noted that this book provides important understandings of disciplinary literacy that will connect with children’s lives, particularly Tello’s curiosity as a child and how he observed and asked questions about everything around him. The picturebook depicts both his development as a scientist and as an Indigenous person and how he combined scientific knowledge with cultural knowledge. By starting the book with Tello’s life as a child exploring caves and burial grounds in the Peruvian Andes, Brown signals the significance of precolonial history and the ways in which Indigenous families lived rich, full lives that were disrupted by colonial violence.

The Biography Clearinghouse has many resources to support teachers as they plan ways to immerse children in this picturebook. In a video interview, Monica Brown talks about her research process, including the personal family connections that inspired her to write this book, the “magic moments” of discovery during her research, her craft and structure in writing biography, and why Julio C. Tello’s story is relevant today. Brown’s mother, an immigrant from Peru, took her family for long visits to Peru, including visiting family on the Julio C. Tello Boulevard in Lima. One magic moment was when Brown discovered that Julio’s nickname in his Indigenous language of Quechua was Sharuko, which means brave, and she envisioned that name prominently displayed on the book cover as the title. Brown also talks about her negotiations with publishers for the book to be bilingual, with the Spanish text coming before the English text on the page.

The website information around this book includes links to other resources to learn about Julio C. Tello, archaeology as a field, and Peru as a country. Because the history and stories of Indigenous people in the Americas have primarily been told by non-Indigenous voices, a list of nonfiction books written by contemporary Indigenous writers and illustrators is included, highlighting the living history of Indigenous peoples and tribal nations. In addition, there are links to the teaching guides and resources available on Monica Brown’s website. The teaching information is divided into different time spans based on the amount of time available in the classroom from one to two hours to one to two days or one to two weeks.

This roundtable encouraged participants to consider biographies as more than a source of information and life histories through a focus on the role of biographies in developing disciplinary literacy. By immersing readers into the ways in which scientists, artists, inventors, and historians think and work, they gain a much richer understand-

ing of these fields of study that may influence their own future decisions and pathways.

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING. Biographies model how individuals negotiate the world. The Biography Clearinghouse believes that life stories have an important role to play in social-emotional learning, as they allow “students to explore the character traits of real people” and to see “the ways in which the subject was an agent of change . . . and the ways in which the subject identified with a specific community or communities” (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b). Xenia Hadjioannou, associate professor at Penn State Berks campus, led a discussion designed by Jennifer Graff, associate professor at the University of Georgia, who could not attend the conference.

This roundtable presentation focused on middle schoolers’ explorations of Duncan Tonatiuh’s (2019) *Soldier for Equality: José de la Luz Sáenz and the Great War*, an award-winning biography of the Mexican American activist who volunteered to serve in World War I believing that Mexican Americans’ patriotism and bravery would challenge discrimination against them when they returned to the US. The Explore Social-Emotional Learning section of The Biography Clearinghouse’s entry for this picture-book, entitled “Social Justice Concerns in Personal Lives and Society” (Hadjioannou & Thulin Dawes, 2022), asks students to identify prejudice within the book, within their own lives (micro/personal level), and within our larger society (macro/social). Because the use of this book is prohibited in some Georgia districts, students explored the text in homeschool and out-of-school settings.

Students’ responses were recorded on a Padlet. First, they identified the ways in which Luz experienced prejudice and documented his actions in response. For example, one student noted that Sáenz, a volunteer foot soldier, was deeply involved in decoding French messages, but received no verbal or monetary credit for the work. Another student noted that while other soldiers mocked him for the decoding work, his perseverance rewarded him with a level of safety, as the decoding bunker was thirty feet below ground. Others noted that Sáenz’s desire to teach was a direct action against the circumstances of his own life and the poorly funded segregated schools that he had attended. His life work focused on empowering Mexican American children through their education.

Next, students made connections to their own lives. One noted that because they were homeschooled, they haven’t experienced a lot of direct bullying. However, in early November 2024, the student’s family continued to wear masks in public to protect against COVID-19. At a church class, a guest speaker asked the student to take off the mask because it made the visitor feel uncomfort-

able. Soon, the student’s classmates chimed in, agreeing with the visitor and expressing their discomfort for the first time. The student connected their emotional response to this isolation and targeting to what Sáenz experienced, noting that even if it feels weird to see people in masks, it’s rude and potentially dangerous to ask them to take their masks off.

Finally, students made macro connections to our larger society. The friends of one student’s parents established a soup kitchen in Gaza. Seeing photos of their efforts, the student expressed concern for the children of Gaza, who were experiencing violence, homelessness, and starvation as the result of a war for which they were not responsible and who had nowhere to go solely because of their identity. Another student made a connection between *Soldier for Equality* (Tonatiuh, 2019) and the graphic memoir *Huda F. Cares?* (Famy, 2023), noting that, like Sáenz in the early twentieth century, Huda Famy is targeted in the early twenty-first century because of her cultural and religious identity, enduring strangers’ unprompted questions about her clothing and appearance.

Throughout this roundtable session, participants made connections to other books for young people and previous classroom conversations with graduate, undergraduate, and K–12 students. They reflected upon the power of biography to make connections across time and cultures, which allow readers to consider the courage and tenacity of individuals who face dehumanizing words and actions. Biographies are a powerful tool for supporting students’ social-emotional development, their awareness of their own strengths, and their interconnectedness to other people.

CREATE NEW TEXTS

The Biography Clearinghouse encourages educators to consider a wide range of text production as part of their classroom work. When reading biographies, it is natural to focus on genre study and to support students writing a biography or memoir. The Clearinghouse notes that writing “biography enables readers to experience the process of writing about the past by (1) selecting and using evidence and (2) trying out the processes followed by authors and illustrators” (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b). However, many other text types can also be generated by “applying specific research or writing strategies to other genres, or working off of the illustrations to create new art, or creating and conducting scientific experiments inspired by the subjects” (The Biography Clearinghouse, 2025b). Biographies offer a range of endeavors for young people to pursue and create. Erika Thulin Dawes, associate provost at Lesley University, led this table.

This roundtable began with an articulation of the goals of the “Create New Texts and Artifacts” portion of the three-part framework, as discussed in the previous paragraph. Next, readers were introduced to *Building Zaha: The Story of Architect Zaha Hadid* (Trentler-Krylov, 2020), an award-winning biography of the noted twentieth-century Iraqi architect.

Drawing upon one of the teaching ideas from the *Building Zaha* Biography Clearinghouse entry entitled “Childhood Experiences and the Lives We Want to Live” (Thulin-Dawes & Waugh, 2022), Thulin Dawes guided attendees through a two-part “Create” activity. Participants first considered the potential of diagrams and infographics to help students identify Hadid’s evolution as an architect from childhood to adulthood, particularly her deep connection to the natural environment and how nature influenced her architectural design. A middle schooler’s diagram of Hadid’s life, created in response to the picturebook, was shared for participants to consider. The diagram reinforces the tween’s comprehension of the book, but more importantly, her nuanced reading of the experiences and influences within Hadid’s life and their impact on her professionally over time.

Next, attendees were invited to move beyond the book and to use diagrams and infographics to consider key moments, or “seeds,” from their own childhoods that shaped them professionally. Participants mapped out, sketched, or shared their stories with one another, revealing the ways in which the biography of one person can support readers of all ages in understanding their own personal histories a little more deeply. Such an activity also affirms for young people that who they are in childhood is important: They are already shaping their future lives by pursuing their interests and hobbies.

The roundtable session concluded with a discussion of other ways to position young people’s reading of biographies to support their growth as writers and creators. For example, students can compare and contrast Trentler-Krylov’s *Building Zaha* with Jeanette Winter’s *The World Is Not a Rectangle: A Portrait of Architect Zaha Hadid* (2017) to explore the ways in which different writers approach the same subject; this is a lesson students can apply to their reading and writing of biographies, but also to their reading and writing of nonfiction books on any topic. Such considerations demonstrate to young people that they can choose their text structures based on their writing goals and what they want to say, as opposed to following a single formula.

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Conclusion

At the end of the roundtable portion of the evening, session attendees discussed their experiences and new ways they could situate the exploration of biography across a range of classrooms from undergraduate children’s literature classes, to high school science classes, to elementary classes. In her welcome letter at the beginning of the NCTE 2024 Convention Program, 2024 Convention Program Chair and NCTE President Elect Tonya Perry wrote the following:

When we teach our students, it is far more than teaching for that moment and far more than teaching a particular skill in isolation. When we teach our students, the larger, more far-reaching purpose is for our scholars to learn to use the lessons from the classroom to transform their own lives and the lives of others. (Perry, 2024, p. 5)

In this endeavor, the goals of The Biography Clearinghouse, CLA, and NCTE are intertwined. ▣

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OTIS AND WILL DISCOVER THE DEEP: THE RECORD-SETTING DIVE OF THE BATHYSPHERE.

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