



## **Inspiring American Women: Painting Them into the Picture**

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### **Introduction**

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Women of American history should be taught in elementary schools. The stories of courageous, determined women are left out of typical fifth-grade texts. Children should know about Molly Pitcher, Juana Inez de la Cruz, Stagecoach Mary Fields, Molly Bannaky, Bessie Coleman, Maggie Gee, and Fannie Lou Hamer, as well as more recognizable names like Sacajawea, Harriet Tubman, Annie Oakley, Wilma Rudolph, and Eleanor Roosevelt. America's story is multicultural. It is the story of people from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. America's women had myriad points of view and aspirations. Women always played a role in our political culture, although it took decades for women to gain political equality with men. Correspondence between Abigail and John Adams gives us a flavor for the times when the Founding Fathers were framing our nation. Abigail wrote over two thousand letters to her husband. On March 31, 1776, she wrote, "And by the way in the new Code of Laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make I desire you would Remember the Ladies...." <sup>1</sup> Her wishes were not taken seriously by her husband. He characterized her attitude as "saucy." It is this very characteristic that appeals to children. American history can be bland. I urge teachers to add the spicy stories of America's women as they teach American history.

I want kids to feel inspired, as I am, by the strength, nerve, and perseverance of American women. I get emotionally connected as I read about each one of them. The achievements behind their words compel me to listen. Many of the women I want to share with my students came from poverty, enslavement, and oppression. Their quality of character illuminates each story. They are examples from the past that can strengthen my students' present. My school's community is economically depressed. Most of my students speak a language other than English at home. Many struggle with reading comprehension. In working to break down barriers to understanding, I have found significant success using picture books. Images provide and support the gathering of background knowledge. The illustrations give context for the story. They scaffold meaning for English-language learners. Without pictures my street-smart city dwellers would be hard-pressed to imagine Stagecoach Mary Field's wild 1880s Montana. Equally unimaginable to them is Eleanor Roosevelt absorbing political knowhow as FDR's supportive wife among the elite of 1920s New York. Illustrations set the historic scene, color the emotions, and make the story accessible by bridging cultural, generational, and linguistic gaps. Women who made their mark on America encourage this generation to conquer their fears and follow their dreams.

While digging around for information on Harriet Tubman, I came across this mournful comment by James Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*: "I have great respect for that unsung army of black men and women. ... I am proud of these people not because of their color, but because of their intelligence and their spiritual force and their beauty. The country should be proud of them, too, but, alas, not many people in this country even know of their existence." <sup>2</sup> In many ways, times haven't changed since Baldwin made this comment in 1963. Not many people know about the remarkable men and women who took risks, stood up to stereotypical slights, and fought for their rights to the betterment of our nation. Women of the Civil Rights Movement, such as Diane Nash, Minnijean Brown-Trickey, and Myrlie Evers-Williams, should be household names. They represent a vital part of our history that simply isn't taught in public schools. For instance, in the 1950s and 60s people died for the right to vote, but since the story isn't broadly taught, only a muted outcry could be heard this summer when the Supreme Court gutted the Voting Rights Act. Senator John Lewis broke down in tears, yet few young people know who he is or have a clue that their own enfranchisement is threatened by state lawmakers who today would put restrictions on voting eligibility. Stories of the youth of the 1960s are powerful examples of the potential of politically active youth. It is our responsibility as teachers to bring out these stories in our classrooms as we teach civics, social studies, and history.

History textbooks drop the ball while telling the story of America. In California, fifth-grade students get a sketchy view of Native peoples, a robust description of explorers, and some idea of early European settlement life. Then much time is devoted to the Founding Fathers and the Declaration, the Revolution, and Constitution. The textbook *History Alive!* <sup>3</sup> does a respectable job introducing the Middle Passage and the causes of the Civil War, but slogs through details of battles, generals, and politics. Finally, modern American history gets short shrift. Brief mention is made of both World Wars and Viet Nam. In our history book, the Civil Rights Movement gets a half page of print under a photo of Martin Luther King. The textbook is written in third person by what Sam Wineburg, professor of history education at Stanford, calls a "corporate author who speaks from a position of transcendence, a position of knowing from on high." <sup>4</sup> Wineburg points out that textbook writers don't show primary sources, offer varying points of view, or tell children that historians actually argue over what a historical fact means. Textbook writers generalize. They condense the complex story of our nation into simplified chunks of time. Reading these texts, children learn about the founding fathers, battles, inventions, documents, and geography, but miss out on the personalities and the diversity of class, race, and gender. Moreover, textbooks gloss over significant numbers of people whose struggles and triumphs are the foundation of our present society. American history needs to be about "we, the people." It's time we told the story of the unsung army of people who built America.

## Content Objectives

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This unit's goal is to restore the perspective of the mothers, sisters, and aunts of American history. By using picture books, I'll introduce students to clear examples of their point of view. Illustrations interpret text. Students will gain skills identifying elements in the pictures that enhance the story and reveal the author's point of view. A lifestory reads more like a movie than a snap shot. Students will have to wrestle with understanding that attitudes and circumstances change over the course of a lifetime. A complex America emerges that may not fit neatly into the outline devised by textbook makers, but it will impel students to make connections between eras, economic strata, and political forces. One unit will not tell the whole of American history from all possible diverse perspectives. However, the authors of children's picture books are

stepping forward "singing" new stories of diverse Americans. Deborah Hopkinson, Pam Munro Ryan, Robert H. Miller, and Alice McGill have responded to the spirit of Baldwin's lament with striking pictorial biographies. This unit will view several approaches to successful picture-book biographies. It will offer a contrast with books that children tend to abandon. The unit will provide a significant compilation of strong pictorial biographies for classroom use, either individually as an introduction to specific historic periods or collectively as a basis for a language arts unit on biography. The list will aid teachers implementing the Common Core language arts standards, which emphasize narrative, explanatory or informational writing, and argument. We are expected to teach students to gather evidence, analyze data, and identify perspectives. Studying the lives of American women in such an accessible form as the picture book will prepare young children for more in-depth research. Students will graduate from exploring picture books into reading chapter books and historical fiction as their reading levels advance. Undoubtedly, students will scour the Internet to pursue answers to questions and to verify facts. By hooking students with a fascinating story, we can then introduce informational text and provide background knowledge. This rich body of literature will help students consider the contributions of American women as a whole and what their lives tell us about our past, present, and future.

### **Making Meaning with Picture Books**

Biographical picture books are perfectly designed to help teachers hook their students into caring about history. They are especially effective with children who are reluctant readers. My students are bilingual; most speak a language other than English at home with their families. Many parents are hesitant English speakers. While students move from one spoken language to another with enough proficiency to test out of intensive English language instruction, they practice sustained fluent English speaking, reading, and writing only at school. Academic language is limited to the classroom and is often incomprehensible to them at first reading. This necessitates scaffolding strategies such as direct vocabulary instruction <sup>5</sup> and the deliberate use of graphic organizers.

I notice mixed outcomes for required reading and writing outside of class. Low motivation, lack of self-confidence, and high anxiety block the learning process. Students tend to self-select books with images and illustrations. Comic books and graphic novels lower what Stephen Krashen calls, referring to Dulay and Burt (1977), the "affective filter" or mental block against reading. Visual media lower the affective filter, allowing "comprehensible input" through thereby attaining understanding. <sup>6</sup> Pictorial biography, like a graphic novel, is a highly visual medium for teaching history. The visual display of complex situations gives the English language learner (ELL) a path to understanding.

One book that works exceptionally well is *Molly Bannaky* by Alice McGill and Chris Soentpiet. It tells the compelling story of an early American woman. The brilliant synergy of words and pictures enabled an ELL student of mine to grasp the irony of Molly Bannaky's dilemma: once herself an indentured servant, Molly's survival depends on her buying a slave. My student studied one particular illustration depicting the scene on the wharf at the slave auction. My student noticed details: the ship, the dock, the crowd of fully dressed white people (mostly men). Barely clad black men in chains hang their heads. But Bannaky (her future husband), on the block, holds his head up. As the crowd takes his measure, the text on the page says he looks each one in the eye. Molly buys him and vows to set him free as soon as her farm is successful. That page gets to the heart of Maryland life in 1690. My student and I pored over the image and discussed her observations. Did she know where the ship might be from? What were the people doing? Why did she think Bannaky acted differently than the rest of the slaves? Why did his act of defiance, of looking her in the eye, appeal to Molly? The drama of the story unfolded. Molly and Bannaky marry and have children against local convention and law. The story ends with Bannaky's sudden illness and death leaving Molly alone again to fend for herself and

her children.

I read to my student the rather long author's note on the final page. It tells what happened next. Molly and her daughters thrive. One daughter marries a freed slave who adopts her last name. They have a family. Molly teaches her grandson to read and write. He is Benjamin Banneker, who grows up to be a noted astronomer, publisher of almanacs, and surveyor of Washington D. C. My student and I were deeply moved. She completely understood how scary it must have been to homestead on your own as a woman. She appreciated Molly's attitude of respect for and empathy with Bannaky. She could see how they made a good team and grew to love each other. She enjoyed projecting the bond between Molly and her grandson into his future success as a notable African American scientist. Furthermore, this book had a long-term effect on her understanding of American history. As the school year progressed and my class debated the causes of the Civil War, this ELL student brought the strongest point to our class debate. She was able to articulate with conviction that the cause of the Civil War rested on the money being made off enslaved people. She built her understanding of Southern economics on the clear image and background knowledge gleaned from examining the illustrations in *Molly Bannaky*. She connected the economic realities Molly faced with the reasons why Southern farmers and plantation owners feared losing the source of their livelihood, extending her understanding of the economics of 1690s to the national calamity of the 1860s.

### **Balancing Words and Pictures**

Words and images go hand in hand. Words can, however, overpower images and vice versa. How do you spot the right balance? Does this question reveal what makes *Molly Bannaky* so effective? What makes a good picture book, especially for teaching history? The key to a successful picture book is the blend of pictures and words in storytelling. William Moebius in his "Introduction to Picturebook Codes" <sup>7</sup> quotes Irving Massy as saying, "Thinking consists of a constant alternation between image-making and word-making." <sup>8</sup> There is no one best formula for combining words and images. As in *Molly Bannaky*, the images should provoke questions, which in turn impel the child to read the words for understanding. In other cases, confusing words and concepts move the reader to look to illustrations for elucidation. Students will abandon a book if they are overwhelmed by looking back and forth to make sense of the story.

The problem with many pictorial biographies is sometimes having too much of a good thing. Two biographies of Annie Oakley can be held up for comparison: *Bull's Eye: A Photobiography of Annie Oakley* by Sue Macy and *Shooting for the Moon: The Amazing Life and Times of Annie Oakley* by Stephen Krensky and Bernie Fuchs. *Bull's Eye*, on one hand, has pages of great primary source photographs and quotes, but the prose is long-winded. Macy is Oakley's great grandniece. She tells the story with respect and reverence. Perhaps she wants to set the record straight, and that explains the lagging prose. I suspect Annie Oakley's story has been distorted by movies, plays, and musicals. Today's young reader is not biased by her fame, so the effort to teach us the truth about Annie is oppressive. I imagine my students looking through the pictures and skipping over the prose. This is a book that would be abandoned by most of the students in my class. *Shooting for the Moon*, on the other hand, gets the blend right. Fuchs sets the scene with impressionistic oil paintings. Krensky has a storyteller's timing. He starts with a young Annie. Tragedy strikes early in her life with the death of her father. Then there is a great injustice. When she is ten years old, Annie is sent to a poorhouse and is given out to work on a farm with the promise that after her chores she can practice shooting game. Unfortunately, the chores are endless. Annie is virtually a slave. It takes her two years to get up the nerve to run away. Twelve years old and back home again, she earns money selling game that she has shot so clean that it winds up on the plates of fine Cincinnati restaurants. Annie aims only at the bird's head; no meat is wasted. In this way Annie supports herself and helps pay off her mother's mortgage. All this happens before she meets Frank

Butler and becomes superstar. Krensky edits out excess information and focuses on dramatic turns. The color and emotion of Fuchs' illustrations are captivating. Krensky adds an author's note remarking on Oakley's place breaking barriers for women in sports linking her accomplishments in the Wild West Show with accomplishments of present sports phenomena. While both books clearly propose to inspire young people, Krensky and Fuchs hold the attention and hit the mark. Macy's tribute to her great-aunt is an example of inadequate words overwhelmed by stacks of photographs, which are fine for reference, but obscure an inspiring story.

For it to accomplish its purpose with ten-year-olds, a book must hold their attention and help them connect between the present and the past. Effective picture-book biographies usually grab your attention with a view of the subject as a child or young woman. On the book cover of *Molly Bannaky*, Molly is a seventeen-year-old milkmaid. The story quickly elicits the reader's sympathy for a character suffering an injustice. Molly is accused of stealing from her lord because the cow kicked over the milk pail, spilling her milk. Then Molly is hauled into court and sentenced to seven years labor as an indentured servant in America. This is a great alternative to being hanged – the automatic punishment. Reading the Bible out loud saves her life. The startling paragraph describing this event is accompanied by a sunlit tableau with bewigged judges, frowning men, and Molly reading a Bible. The page ends with, "Molly's voice rang out clear and true." The story has a fast pace. So much happens in a few pages. As she sails away from home forever, she looks forlorn, and we feel impelled to find out what happens next. This book is a page-turner. Barbara Bader, borrowing from Remy Charlip, calls this effect "the drama of the turning page."<sup>9</sup> There are many facets to the set-up of this story that appeal to ten year-olds. Law in the 1680s was arbitrary and unfair. Reading really saved her life! Molly will never see her home and family again, and she has no clue where she's going. This is storytelling at its best. McGill's expertise as a storyteller takes the lead in this book. The story is laid out, builds quickly, and sustains our interest at each turn of the page. Chris Soentpiet was charged with taking McGill's word pictures and creating illustrations for her text. His illustrations reflect the drama with lighting as if on stage and facial expressions between characters that capture the mood. Soentpiet took painstaking care to create historically accurate illustrations. On his website he tells an account of having to prove that Holstein cows existed in America in the seventeenth century.<sup>10</sup> This indicates the dedication illustrators have to have if they are going to hold true to the historical fact. In a great picture-book biography, the reader trusts both storytellers – artist and wordsmith. *Molly Bannaky* is successful because McGill and Soentpiet found the perfect balance of words with images.

Another example of great storytelling is Chris Van Allsburg's *Queen of the Falls*. This is the story of Annie Edson Taylor, the widow who sent herself over Niagara Falls in a barrel to try to raise some money. Van Allsburg is a master of blending just the right words with dramatic pictures. His timing and pace make the reader want to turn the page even while also wanting to get all the hints from his illustrations. He often lets the pictures carry the story. J. Hillis Miller in *Illustration* argues all sides of the debate when he asks, which is the stronger medium of communication, picture or words?<sup>11</sup> On the side of picture, he quotes Svetlana Alpers, who says that the graphic arts present an element of a thing "that is in no way possible through words."<sup>12</sup> How can you put into words how you feel about the woman in the barrel and the imminent tumble over the falls? It's the way you feel waiting for a roller coaster to plunge. You don't need words. The picture puts you right there. Still, the wordless pages in this book are few. Van Allsburg continues his storytelling in a blend of prose and picture. Some picture books are brilliant and effective without words. Works by David MacCaulay (*Castle*) and Istvan Banyai (*Zoom*) are thought-provoking. However, I have not come across a wordless biography. A lifestory requires words.



We might wonder if primary source material can hold up its part of the balance in a picture book biography. Maybe old-fashioned photographs lack resonance. Perhaps they just don't illustrate the dramatic moments of the story. Tonya Bolden gets around this problem in her biography of Maritcha Lyons, *Maritcha: A Nineteenth-Century American Girl*. This story is based on the memoir of a woman who began her life in antebellum New York City, the daughter of an abolitionist. As a young girl, she lived through the Draft Riots of 1863. Mobs set buildings on fire, looted businesses and rich people's homes, and beat up blacks. Poor Irish immigrants resented being drafted for the Civil War. Blacks were not allowed to join the Army. Maritcha's family owned property and businesses. Her godfather was a prominent African American surgeon who had traveled to Scotland to become a doctor because there were no medical schools open to blacks in America. To escape harm during the riots, Maritcha and her siblings moved in with friends across the river in Brooklyn while her parents protected their home. After the war they moved to Providence, Rhode Island, where Maritcha petitioned the state legislature to be admitted to high school. The legislature overturned public-school segregation. In 1869 she was the first black person to graduate from Providence High. Maritcha Lyons became a teacher and assistant principal in Brooklyn – during a career spanning fifty years. She wrote her memoir in 1928. Bolden came across this memoir while doing research at the New York City Public Library and felt it begged to be turned into a picture book for children. She illustrates the story with family photographs, realia (Maritcha's father recorded all the items destroyed in the riot on a ledger), and period photos of New York City. Each illustration is captioned and given generous space on the page. This is a book that can be read straight through to get the story and reread for the captions. There are no photos of the Lyons family during the riots, but there are photos of the rioters. Because Maritcha mentions attending the first world's fair in New York, Bolden takes the opportunity to show us images of this event and extend the lesson. Bolden's photobiography uses primary source material, but it doesn't allow the illustrations to overpower the narrative. The book is a fabulous resource, adding a unique picture of America during the Civil War as well as holding up a model of a young, single woman who stood her ground for civil rights and chose to be a life-long educator. I hope Bolden has a sequel on the drawing board. The history of education after the Civil War is the story Baldwin hoped would be told. Bolden's book is exactly the user-friendly type needed to reach the goals of the Common Core. Primary sources can be infused into storytelling without smothering the story.

## **A Turning Point for Women**

When one compiles a list of children's books on the women of America, one notices a common characteristic. Women who were Native American, pioneers, early colonialists, or former slaves exude an attitude of solid confidence. Mary Ludwig Hays McCauley, known as "Molly Pitcher," was a woman who served the Revolutionary Army. She ran across the battlefield on a blistering hot day between a spring and her husband's cannon unit with her water pitcher. When he collapsed from the heat, Molly took her husband's place at the gun. Children's author Anne Rockwell gives us a stirring vision of Valley Forge and the battle of Monmouth in *They Called Her Molly Pitcher*. Joseph Bruchac's *Sacajawea* plants an indelible image of this young girl's early kidnapping, life as a slave of a rival Native American tribe, marriage to French trapper, and guide on Lewis and Clark's expedition. Bruchac's *Sacajawea* is not a picture book. It is a rich piece of historical fiction with which to teach point of view. It challenges readers with multiple voices presenting the narrative, and it includes Native American storytelling at the beginning of each chapter. It may work best as a read-aloud or as the book for a small group literature circle. I recommend using it for children to practice visualization. Molly Pitcher and Sacajawea are examples of women in America's early history who were sturdy; they saw a need and supplied it. They were direct, practical, and strong. While they followed their husbands, they did not take a back seat to them. What happened to the perception of women's capabilities as our country advanced?

Something changed for East Coast women in the late 1700s. Page Smith sheds light on the shifting attitudes

about women in *Daughters of the Promised Land: Women in American History*. Smith explains how ideas about marriage changed. Puritan ideals define the purpose of marriage as essential to the greater good of the community. With the growth of a middle class came a new attention to fashion and a loosening of the old Puritan ways that were replaced by reformed religious ideas and the freedom to marry for love. Women were, says Smith, "for virtually the first time in history, in the position of adapting themselves to the prevailing masculine notion of what constituted desirability in a woman."<sup>13</sup> Being middle or upper class in America gave young ladies time to fuss over European fashion. Some adopted the view that women were frail, that they needed protection, and that they had limited roles to play in society. Clearly, women not so fortunate had to keep their minds on their work. Yet the new middle-class values crept into society and politics. What saved American women from this slump were the abolitionists, the Civil War, and ultimately the women's suffrage movement. In fact, it was at a meeting where women's suffrage was under debate that Sojourner Truth lost her patience and stood up to deliver her "Ain't I a Woman?" speech. Her point was well taken. No one ever lifted her over a puddle on a rainy day. Women took the stage again at the end of the nineteenth century.

Children's book authors have given us an array of superb books on strong women of the late 1800s. Linda Arms White writes and Nancy Carpenter illustrates *I Can Do That! Esther Morris Gets Women the Vote*. Esther rises to the occasion when adversity strikes in the 1830s. She stands up to a mob that wants to burn down her church for its abolitionist teachings. A widow with a baby, she moves out West to claim her right to her husband's property, but it is denied her. Eventually remarried, she follows her second husband to Wyoming and is present as Wyoming becomes the first territory to grant women the vote in 1869. In 1870 she is appointed the first woman judge. Another tale from the Wild West is Robert H. Miller's *The Story of Stagecoach Mary Fields*. Mary (born enslaved in 1832) is best friends growing up with her white owner's daughter. After they are grown and the Civil War is over, her friend, who has become a nun, moves to Montana. Mary gets a letter inviting her to go out and work for the convent. She runs the property for the nuns and gets mixed up with a ranch hand who doesn't want to take orders from a black woman. They shoot it out. Mary wins. The bishop is not pleased. The nun sees an ad for stagecoach driver on a new dangerous mountain run and encourages Mary to apply for the job. Mary is the fastest at hitching up the wagon, and she gets the job: the first African American woman postal carrier and only the second woman to work for the U. S. Postal Service. Mary becomes legendary shooing off bandits and toughing out a night surrounded by wolves. These are fun stories of strong, adventurous women. Each follows the good picture-book combination of balancing words and image. Each gives students the opportunity to analyze character, plot, cause, and effect. They show women taking charge of their lives, benefiting their communities, and demanding equal treatment with men in contrast to prevalent attitudes that women were weak and reliant on men for their care.

Back in the East and Midwest, the women's suffrage movement picked up steam. Smith writes, "The woman's rights movement was indeed an offshoot of the agitation against slavery, a campaign most of whose foot soldiers and many of whose officers were women."<sup>14</sup> Women became politically active organizing abolition societies. In 1840 seven American women delegates were turned away from the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London including Elizabeth Cady Stanton. *Elizabeth Leads the Way: Elizabeth Cady Stanton and the Right to Vote* by Tanya Lee Stone gives clear examples of the restrictions on girls and women as Elizabeth was growing up. The book emphasizes injustice when a visitor sighs at how sad it is that Elizabeth's new baby sister is a girl, and another time when her father, a judge, informs a widow she must lose her farm because as a woman she can't own property. Elizabeth is outraged. Her quest for equal rights begins. She vows to do anything a man can do. This is why she insists on traveling to London along with her husband as a delegate to the World Anti-Slavery Convention. Being rejected for being female angered her and her friend Lucretia Mott. By 1848 these two women opened the first Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York. Women,

including Susan B. Anthony, responded to the cause. Abolition and woman's suffrage often blended in speeches and rallies. People came just to see women take the stage. The looming Civil War brought more opportunities for women to organize and gain status. Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Clara Barton created a corps of nurses, women organized sanitary fairs to create and supply military hospitals, and with emancipation thousands of young women teachers went south to start schools. Women performed essential roles that proved their abilities to organize and accomplish vital missions for America.

Of all the women of the 1800s, Harriet Tubman is one of the most impressive. Born a slave in 1820, Harriet grew up on a Maryland plantation. She escaped to Philadelphia in 1849 and the next year began a series of nineteen return trips. She is single-handedly responsible for leading nearly 70 people to freedom. Instructions she left behind helped over 230 more. She was known as the "Moses" of her people. As she gained fame, she was invited to be the guest speaker at abolitionist meetings in Boston and traveled with a group of abolitionists to South Carolina to aid the Union Army as nurse, scout, and spy. She led Col. James Montgomery's forces in a raid that freed 800 people. *Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad* by Michael Martin is illustrated by Dave Hoover and Bill Anderson. A brief graphic novel, it is easily accessible to all readers; the images get to the heart of her story. Another picture book team, Lori Mortensen and Frances Moore, created *Harriet Tubman: Hero of the Underground Railroad*. This book depicts the episode when she was seven and was hired out to a mistress who whipped her if the baby in her care cried. Harriet ran away when the woman came after her with the whip for eating a sugar cube. Hiding in a neighbor's pigpen for five days, Harriet scrounged for food scraps. Hungry, she returned to the house and was sent back to the plantation in shame. There is a substantial body of literature at various reading levels on Harriet Tubman.<sup>15</sup> She would be an excellent topic for teaching research and expository writing. Tubman is a true American hero. When she was growing up, slaves would run away, but none returned to tell what the North was like. Ann Petry writes, Tubman "became a legend. Each one who heard the story would feel stronger because of her existence. ... their faith in a living God would be strengthened, their faith in themselves would be renewed."<sup>16</sup> Tubman had the strength and courage to save herself and risked her life to save her family and friends. After the Civil War she continued serving her community, creating a home for old and poor African Americans, and she was a key figure in the women's suffrage movement. She inspired people of her day and continues to inspire us. As Petry says, "Freedom's a hard-bought thing, not bought with dust, but bought with all of oneself - the bones, the spirit and the flesh - and once obtained it had to be cherished, no matter what the cost."<sup>17</sup> Harriet Tubman's story needs to be told and retold. Her example shatters any notion that women are frail and weak.

After the war the women's suffrage movement splintered into groups with diverse perspectives on marriage, race, and sexuality. Victoria Claflin Woodhull and her sister Tennie C. Claflin are a rags-to-riches story. Kathleen Krull gives young readers an idea of their colorful run in *A Woman for President: The Story of Victoria Woodhull*. The Claflins are so poor that Victoria's father puts her on stage as a medium to earn money for the family. Victoria is beautiful and has a mellifluous voice. The sisters are spiritualists. They move to New York and get Commodore Vanderbilt to set them up as stockbrokers (Woodhull Claflin & Company, Wall Street Brokers), and they publish a newspaper. They are the first women stockbrokers and the first women to start a newspaper. The sisters are ambitious and uninhibited. Victoria has a vision in 1872 and announces that she is running for President. She appears before Congress demanding women's right to vote. This wins enthusiastic support from Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony at the National Woman's Suffrage Association convention. Victoria begins stumping for women's rights. Images in Krull's book are amusing. They get the flavor of various social classes. Krull does not go into the philosophy that put Woodhull at odds with New England suffragettes: free love. Woodhull is embroiled in scandal. She does not get any electoral votes. The



scandal breaks up the suffrage movement. Victoria leaves for London and marries a wealthy Englishman. American suffragettes write her out of their history. Belva Lockwood is the next woman to run for president in 1884. *Ballots for Belva* by Sudipta Bardhan-Quallen tells the story of how Lockwood pushed barriers to become a lawyer. She ran for president twice, but the ballots were not counted. Lockwood illustrates two sides of the push for women's equality: equal rights and women's suffrage. Lockwood broke barriers by insisting on her right to practice law. She was the first woman to argue a case in front of the Supreme Court. Her political activism pressed the point that women should be able to vote. Interestingly enough, these two strands of activism were not always working in sync on the national scale. Not all women activists wanted to vote. The debate over the role of women in society went on for decades before the Nineteenth Amendment was ratified in 1920.

That debate continues today. Women are politicians, electricians, doctors, pilots, CEOs. The twentieth century is the setting for women breaking barriers to male-dominated professions. The picture book list at the end of this unit includes well-crafted biographies of women leaders from Amelia Earhart and Marian Anderson to Eleanor Roosevelt. Teach these women to our children. Let there be a well-rounded history of America in elementary schools. Honor our grandmothers, mothers, aunts, and sisters.

## Teaching Strategies

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The first step in teaching strategies for using pictorial biography to teach history and language arts is to teach students to read paintings. Observation tools include portrait images from on-line museum galleries projected for whole-class discussion. I will give out a graphic organizer for students to take notes on what they see and what they wonder. Students will sit in pairs and share before the discussion is opened to the entire class to share. I will also use various practices to help students analyze a book. We will look for motifs and notice patterns of lighting that express mood and foreshadowing, in the way that reading specialist Suzette Youngs tested in her study, which proved the positive outcomes of increased discussion among students over the text when they consistently practice picture-book analysis.<sup>18</sup> In conjunction I will also teach the codes described by William Moebius, who lists position, size and diminishing returns, perspective, frame, line and capillarity, and color among his interactive graphic codes.<sup>19</sup> These lessons will build observation skills over time.

Next I will integrate reading and writing by having students read biographies and take notes on post-its. They will practice re-telling the story to a partner and then write a summary. A second writing exercise will be creating a timeline. Students will be able to use the same post-its to organize events and add dates. A third writing exercise will be to have the partners work together to create side-by-side poems. This will help them discern the emotional aspects of the life of the person whom they are reading about and encourage them to make personal connections.

After students have had four or five successful attempts at reading pictorial biographies, I plan to teach students how to conduct research. They will choose one of the women subjects of their biographies and discover more information through books, encyclopedias, websites, and databases. This will mean frequent visits to the computer lab and library. The students will pose questions, research answers, and present their findings in a clearly written research paper. Students will work together on posters and art projects, such as portraiture, to illustrate their work.

By the end of the unit, students will plan an event to share their knowledge. They will invite their families to a living history night. Students will present living tableaux, dressing in costume with props to act out scenes depicted in the illustrations of their biography. They will perform side-by-side poems. Research papers, posters, poems, and art will be on display.

## Classroom Activities

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### Activity One: Reading a Picture

Objective: Students will observe a primary source to gather information about eighteenth-century Boston.

Materials: projector, graphic organizer, chart paper, postcards

This lesson begins with projecting a portrait from the Yale Art Gallery:

John Singleton Copley's *Elizabeth Storer Smith*, 1769.

*Observations.* I will ask the students to take a few moments to look at the picture. Then they should write down their observations on the left side of a graphic organizer where they see the words "What I notice." I'll ask them to make a list of things they see in the picture and give them a few minutes to make their observations.



John Singleton Copley (1738-1815), *Mrs. Isaac Smith* (Elizabeth Storer) (1726-1786), 1769. Oil on canvas, 50 1/8 x 40 1/8 in. (127.3 x 101.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery.

Students will turn to their elbow partner and share observations, answering the question, "What do you see?" Allow three minutes for each partner to share. Then ask for a scribe to create a class master list on chart paper. Give each student a postcard of the portrait. Take down a master list interjecting more observation questions. "What do you notice?" allows students to interpret the details. "What else do you see?" encourages closer observation. "What is going on in this piece?" implies that there is more complexity to the piece than may be apparent at first glance or that there may be a narrative to the piece. "What do you see that makes you say that?" makes students accountable for their observations by citing visual evidence.

*Questions.* Next take another few minutes for quiet think time to fill out the right side of the graphic organizer where they see the words "What I wonder." Again, share with elbow partners before sharing with others. Walk around the room while students engage in this task. Spot some good questions, and ask if you might call on the student to get the discussion going. Call specific students to explain what their partner wonders.

*Symbols.* Students will wonder who Mrs. Smith is and why she was important enough to have her portrait made. She is the wife of a prosperous Boston merchant named Isaac Smith. Note the evidence in the portrait of her wealth: pearls in her hair and around her neck, rich colors, and upholstered armchair. Why did Copley chose to paint grapes in her lap? These particular grapes are a rare variety, therefore making her special. Grapes are also a sign of fertility. She had six children and is expecting a seventh. What can you guess about her personality? What is she thinking? Is she happy? At her age in that era in colonial America, childbearing

was life-threatening. This portrait was made before her baby was born. Do you have an opinion of what's on her mind? She did have the baby, and all was well. Still, we can compare her portrait with her husband's and imagine what she might say to him.

*Creative Writing Narrative.* Have students write a diary entry from Elizabeth Storer Smith's perspective. Describe your life based on the information you gained from analyzing the painting. Explain what is expected of you from your family and society. Describe how you felt posing for this painting. <sup>20</sup>

### **Activity Two: Summarizing a Picture-Book Biography**

Objective: Students will read and summarize a picture book demonstrating an understanding of both words and pictures.

Materials: Two copies of picture book biographies for side-by-side partner reading. Post-it? notes. Projector.

The first day choose a biography to demonstrate such as *The Story of Stagecoach Mary Fields* by Robert H. Miller. Show how to distribute post-its? about every three pages. Begin to read. Stop and summarize at each post-it. Write so students can see and place the post-it on the page. Talk about the pictures as you go and include information gleaned from the pictures in your post-it summaries. After the reading is complete, re-tell the story using the post-its and pictures. This could be a break point. Next take the post-its and project on a screen to the whole class as you write the summary of the entire book together.

Begin the following lesson with introducing the class to the collection of biographies. Do a quick picture walk and hint at who each person is and what makes her life great reading. Students then choose a book to read side-by-side with a partner. They each read their own copy of the same book. They follow your example making post-it note summaries every few pages and discuss the pictures and words as they go. Walk the room and check in on partners. When students finish reading, have them practice re-telling the story to their partners before writing the summary.

### **Activity Three: Side-by-Side Poems**

Objective: Students will understand the emotional content of an inspiring American woman's life.

Materials: Two copies of picture book biographies for side-by-side partner reading. Post-it notes in two colors such as yellow and blue. Large sheet graphic organizer divided into fourteen sections, seven on each side.

Demonstrate the procedure by reading aloud a picture book biography. Stop to note on a yellow post-it words from the text that grab you. Ask the students to choose phrases that they like. Discuss the language, metaphors, word choices, and how they appeal to you. Write the words or phrases on individual post-its and place in the book. When you finish, go through the book again making a chronology of events. Write a brief statement of each event on a blue post-it on the page. Narrow it down to about seven main events. Now you are ready for the side-by-side part of this activity.

Create a chart divided vertically in half. On the left side, place the blue post-it events one at a time in order from top to bottom. Then, go back to the page in the book for each event and see if you have a phrase or word on a yellow post-it. Put the coordinating yellow post-its on the right side of the chart. You may need to write the words from the post-its in bigger print for your chart paper so that the whole class can see. When you are done, test out the poem. It is read from left to right in blocks: first the event phrase, then the found poem phrase. Revise as a class. Then ask two students to volunteer to read. One reads the left side. The other reads

the right side.

The next day children work in pairs with a biography they know well. Follow the same procedure. Give students a large sheet for placing their post-its. Have them copy the post-its onto the sheet. The next step is optional: cut the organizer at the horizontal lines and stack the parts of the poem. Now students can manipulate the order. This gives them the freedom to re-tell the story in a fresh way. Finally they glue the pieces in the order chosen on a new large sheet. The teacher takes these and types them into a table in a Word document like the one below.

Students practice reading their poems. Teach them how to use emphasis, to pause, and to practice good methods of oration. Perform the poems for another class. <sup>21</sup>

Here is a poem written by student and teacher using *Molly Bannaky*.



## Molly and Bannaky by Donovan and Mrs. K.

Molly Walsh sneezed.	Frothy milk seeps into ground.  Penalty: death on the gallows.
Taken to court; Spared by legal loophole: She could read the Bible!	Voice rang out clear and true.
Seventeen years old. Seven years indentured servant.	Dairymaid across the ocean. Callused hands.
Twenty-four Freed to go On her own in Maryland wilderness.	A cart, a plow, two hoes, a bag of seed, and a gun.
At the slave auction Molly bids on African slave.  He was a prince in Africa.	Misery, anger and shame on their faces.  He was a prince in Africa. Dared to look into their eyes.
Molly talked about her hometown with her hands and he gave her his name: Bannaky.	Sweet grass eyes.
Molly freed him; married him.	As tobacco ripened, love and freedom.
Four girls; sudden death.	Alone again. Great sadness struck the family.

### Appendix: District Academic Standards

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The Bayshore Elementary School District is transitioning from California State Standards to the Common Core Standards. The CA State social studies-history standard 5.6.3 specifies understanding the different roles women played during the Revolution. Otherwise, the standards require general knowledge of American

history. Both these standards are met by this unit.

This unit also fulfills the Common Core literacy standards that require students to "read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text." Children love picture books. Informational texts are often dry. Picture-book biography is engaging. My unit shows that students who are given repeated access to picture books develop their observation and conversation abilities. They talk about what interests them. They voice their questions, comments, and opinions. These are the seed ideas for writing and research. Children with a question about a picture will seek answers from other students and from the teacher. This is the teachable moment. Teachers can provide supplemental books, teach how to use a student-friendly database, and bring up images and on the computer. This unit naturally leads to deeper reading and ultimately to writing.

One of the Common Core standards involves teaching point of view: "Describe how a narrator's or speaker's point of view influences how events are described." Teachers can prompt discussion about point of view when they are reading a book together with their students. In this unit certain books lend themselves to introducing young children to the concept of seeing an event from multiple viewpoints. I have mentioned the book on Sacajewea that actually changes voice from chapter to chapter. In the student reference list I give three books about Marian Anderson's Lincoln memorial concert: *When Marian Sang*, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, and *Eleanor, Quiet No More* all bring up the concert and each individual's part in making it happen. This is a fine example of point of view. A teacher could easily take the lesson further to explore the racist thinking of the Daughters of the American Revolution. Common Core is encouraging teaching history in the direction of how historians think. Seeing point of view is a critical thinking skill and the guiding principle in the field of historiography. It is also an important tool for children to use to recognize bias in everyday life.

Inspiring Women of American History therefore specifically addresses both CA State and Common Core standards. This unit is especially useful to teachers of multicultural classes. It addresses issues connected to second-language acquisition. It is also designed to be a source of good books for children.

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Brooklyn Museum. *Picturing a Nation: Teaching with American Art and Material Culture*. New York: Brooklyn Museum, 2002. Jessica S. Sack was education curator at the Brooklyn Museum when this curriculum was created. She is now at the Yale Art Gallery and directed me to the unit "Women and Portraiture."

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## Student Resources

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"Aboard the Underground Railroad— Harriet Tubman Home for the Aged." U.S. National Park Service - Experience Your America. <http://www.nps.gov/nr/travel/underground/ny1.htm> (accessed August 3, 2013). National Park Service site a wonderful resource. This one is her home in Auburn, NY.

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Bruchac, Joseph. *Sacajawea*. San Diego, Calif.: Harcourt Children's Books, 2009. Read aloud for younger class. Switches point of view. Begins chapters with Native American tales.

Ferris, Jeri, and Karen Ritz. *Go Free Or Die: A Story About Harriet Tubman*. Minneapolis: Carolrhoda Books, 1988. Good for beginning chapter book readers.

Goodheart, Lawrence B., and Hugh Hawkins. *Problems in American Civilization: The Abolitionists: Means, Ends and Motivations*. Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath & Co., 1995. p.150 Charlotte Forten Grimke's diary entry for January 31, 1863 titled "Moses" gives Harriet Tubman's description of one of her most harrowing trips leading people to freedom. Primary Source.

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Deborah Hopkinson to contrast points of view on the story of Marian Anderson's Lincoln Memorial performance.

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## Notes

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2. James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*. 115.
3. Diane Hart, Bert Bower, and Jim Lobdell, *History Alive!*.
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10. Chris Soentpiet, "Molly Bannaky", *Chris Soentpiet illustrator and author of children's books*, <http://www.soentpiet.com/molly.htm> (accessed July 14, 2013).
11. J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration*, 66.

12. Svetlana Alpers, quoted in J. Hillis Miller, *Illustration*, 66.

13. Page Smith, *Daughters of the Promised Land*, 63.

14. Ibid. 104.

15. I grew up in Cincinnati, Ohio. I thought I knew something about the Underground Railroad, living on one of the major routes north. I used *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt* by Deborah Hopkinson and *The Barefoot* by Katherine Tegen to introduce young children to American slavery. When I read biographies of Harriet Tubman, however, I was astonished by my ignorance. Jerri Ferris' *Go Free or Die* is a simple chapter book for young readers. *Harriet Tubman: Conductor on the Underground Railroad* by Ann Petry is appropriate for stronger readers. Both would be excellent choices for book club groups.

16. Petry, Ann. *Harriet Tubman, Conductor on the Underground Railroad*, 129.

17. Ibid. 168.

18. Youngs, Suzette. "Understanding History Through the Visual Images in Historical Fiction," *Language Arts*, 379-395.

19. Moebius, "Introduction to picturebook codes."141.

20. Jessica Sack, "Key Teaching Questions prepared for Educators Open House at the Yale University Art Gallery," February 15, 2007. and "Women and Portraiture," from *Picturing A Nation: Teaching with American Art and Material Culture*, Brooklyn Museum, 51.

21. Marguerite Conrad, literacy professor at San Francisco State University, demonstrated this model of creating side-by-side poetry in my class spring 2013. She used Paul Fleischman and Eric Beddows' *Joyful Noise: Poems for Two Voices* to teach the children how to perform side-by-side poems.

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