

New Genres, Same Narratives?:

A Close yet Critical Reading of Obama Biographies

Middle school language arts teachers have historically thought primarily in literary terms. Considerable classroom time has been devoted to books like *A Wrinkle in Time* (L'Engle, 1962), *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969), and *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (O'Dell, 1960); the use of *nonfiction* texts in the middle school has traditionally been located in social studies and sciences classes. With the Common Core State Standards' (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) new focus on informational texts, however, fiction will no longer dominate language arts classrooms. Alongside this shift in genre, the authors of the new Standards also demand a particular type of reader stance (Rosenblatt, 1978), presuming a narrow definition of "text-dependent" reading through which "close attention to the text" allows readers to "draw knowledge from the text" (Coleman & Pimental, 2011).

Though we do not yet know the effects of the new Common Core State Standards, these changes are expected to transform the language arts classroom. Bookshelves

once dominated by fiction will now hold biography, informational, persuasive, procedural (i.e., how-to), and reference texts, ushering in a shift in thinking about formats, genres, textual structures, and quality. Important to remember, however, is that while the expository appearance of nonfiction may appear impartial, no text is neutral. All texts are authored by people working from specific worldviews with the result of privileging some people's ways of thinking and interacting over others' (Janks, 2010). In other words, the work of the present-day language arts teacher must be more than increasing the role of nonfiction in the curriculum; it must also include careful, critical attention to the narratives embedded in informational texts, for stories frame even the most expository of texts (Rosen, 1986; Short, 2012).

In this article, we look at one particular type of nonfiction text—biography—to argue for a complicated reading of the CCSS to include a critical literacy focus. Using biographies about the 44th president, Barack Obama, written for and read by middle school students, we maintain that "close

attention to the text" can indeed prompt readers to utilize a critical literacy lens as they "draw knowledge from the text."

Biographies

One of the more prevalent nonfiction genres (Duke & Tower, 2004; Kiefer & Wilson, 2011), biographies are designed to "convey information about an individual's life and experiences" (Duke & Tower, 2004, p. 135) and often concentrate on historical and political figures. In terms of curricular representation, one group of people has tended to dominate school texts (e.g., European American, male, heterosexual, able-bodied, etc.) (Apple & Christian-Smith, 1991; Luke, DeCastell, & Luke, 1989). So if we as teachers attend to the new "text-dependent" Reading Standards as we also work toward developing democratic citizens (Dewey, 1916), we must consider how existing multiple narratives are both acknowledged and examined, pushing back against the idea that a single narrative exists (Journell, 2011).

Aware of the increasing attention to informational texts in US public schools, we performed

Table 1. Obama biography overview

| Title | Author | Biographical genre |
|--|--------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Barack Obama: Working to Make a Difference</i> | Brill | Narrative chapter-book |
| <i>Barack Obama: An American Story</i> | Carlton & Gentiles | Narrative chapter-book |
| <i>Barack Obama</i> (Remarkable People) | DeMedeiros | Textbook organization |
| <i>Barack Obama</i> (People in the News) | DeVaney & DeVaney | Narrative/textbook hybrid |
| <i>Barack Obama: An American Story</i> | Edwards | Narrative chapter-book |
| <i>Barack Obama</i> (African-American Heroes) | Feinstein | Textbook organization |
| <i>The Obama View: The Historic Fight for the 2008 Democratic Nomination</i> (Monumental Milestones: Great Events of Modern Times) | Gibson | Textbook organization |
| <i>Barack Obama: Our 44th President</i> | Gormley | Narrative chapter-book |
| <i>Obama: A Promise of Change</i> (An Adaptation for Young Readers of S. Thomsen's <i>Obama: From Promise to Power</i>) | Mendell | Narrative chapter-book |
| <i>Barack Obama—44th President</i> (Essential Lives Set 3) | Robinson | Narrative/textbook hybrid |
| <i>Barack Obama: "We Are One People"</i> (African-American Biography Library) | Schuman | Narrative/textbook hybrid |
| <i>Yes We Can: A Biography of President Barack Obama</i> | Thomas | Narrative chapter-book |
| <i>Barack Obama</i> (Black Americans of Achievement: Legacy Edition) | Wagner | Narrative/textbook hybrid |
| <i>Barack Obama</i> (The United States Presidents) | Wheeler | Textbook organization |

a close, critical reading of several Obama biographies published for children and young adults. These books were written using three distinct biographical genres and varied in degrees of complexity (see Table 1). We found that in addition to providing the story of a life, each text also linked to particular ideologies. The books differed in significant ways as seen by which life events the authors selected for inclusion and how the included events were framed (May, Holbrook, & Meyers, 2010). Consider the following opening lines from four Obama biographies. They all provide specific information about the president and his family, but each establishes a different tone, emphasizes different facets of his early life, and presents a different view of his parents.

Example 1. On August 4, 1961, a baby boy was born at Kapi'olani Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. He weighed eight pounds, two ounces. His parents, Ann and Barack, named him after his father, Barack Hussein Obama, but they called their child "Barry." (Gormley, 2008, p. 1)

Example 2. Barack Obama was born on August 4, 1961, in **Honolulu, Hawaii**. Barack's father was also named Barack Obama. He had come to the United States from **Kenya** to go to college. He met Barack's mother, Ann Dunham, while both of them were students at the University of Hawaii. (Feinstein, 2008, p. 1, bold in original)

Example 3. For many years, Barack Obama struggled to make sense of his **multicultural heritage**. He is the son and grandson of people who came from Kansas in the center of the United States. He is also the son and grandson of people who came from a small village in Kenya in East Africa. He grew up in Honolulu, Hawaii, and Jakarta, Indonesia. (Nichols, 2009, p. 1, bold in original)

Example 4. His father was a legend, like John Henry: strong, determined, larger than life. And as with all legends, the line between reality and fiction—that which is true and not true—got blurred over time. Was Barack Obama Sr. really the grown man who had

lifted his friend high over his head, pretending he was going to drop him over a cliff because his friend accidentally dropped his pipe? (Thomas, 2008, p. 1).

These four examples focus on different aspects of Obama's early life. Examples 1 and 2 foreground his birth and where he grew up, while Examples 3 and 4 foreground his internal struggles. Both of these approaches provide the reader with a way of organizing their thinking about Obama. The fact-based approach provides the reader with chronological details that help establish Obama's growth from infant to adult, from baby to president. Examples 3 and 4 provide the reader with a story by which to frame their developing understanding of Obama's life. Example 3 raises the question of identity, and the reader is given the framework of cultural conflict as a way to situate their knowledge about Obama. Example 4 begins not with Obama but with his father, who is compared to an American folktale hero. Establishing Obama's identity in reference to a father who is a "legend" and larger-than-life provides the reader with a way to conceptualize Obama's almost fairytale rise to the presidency.

These examples provide information about Obama's birth and family, but the methods of delivering that information varies. Examples 1 and 2 begin with Obama's birth date, the location of his birth, and the names of his parents. This example gives key, specific details in just a few sentences. Examples 3 and 4 take a more narrative approach. Example 3 begins with a struggle with which many readers

can identify—the struggle to make sense of multiple family cultures—while Example 4 begins with a question about whether or not a parent is really like the person described in family stories. Both of these approaches provide emotional and contextual background but very little in the way of specific details. In all four of the examples, the tone of the biography is established quickly through the language choices and the information given.

Mentor Texts for Close, Critical Writing

These examples also serve as exemplars of a writer's craft and provide an opportunity for students to use mentor texts to bring a critical literacy lens to their own writing. Just as no text is neutral, no writer composes from nowhere; all texts are created with intent. By undertaking a close, critical analysis of writer's craft, students can begin to see that the many decisions they make in composing their own texts—the genre they select, the sentence structure they employ, the tone they construct—constitute their writings as motivated and purposeful. For instance, in addition to examining Examples 1 and 2 for their details and sentence structures, students can consider why the authors chose to represent Obama's life as a series of facts: Who is the writer addressing? What purpose does the text serve? What problem might the text be responding to? What role might the publisher and/or marketplace play in the decisions the author made? Such discussions can support students as critical creators of nonfiction texts.

For example, in an afterschool writing program, a middle school student might opt to use Example 4 as a mentor text for a piece he is writing about his great-grandfather, who emigrated from Italy to the US in the 1930s. Thomas, the author of Example 4, used comparisons to establish how much influence Obama's father had on the president's life. Readers learn that Obama Sr. was "a legend," a comparison, extended with the simile "like John Henry." This literary move prompts readers to consider Obama's father within a certain frame—similar to a folklore character, seeped in exaggeration and myth, whose exploits blur the line between fiction and reality. Taking up Example 4 as a mentor text, the middle school student might write something like the following of his own great-grandfather:

My great-grandpa was an explorer, like Captain Kirk on *Star Trek*. He left Italy when he was a young man to come to a country that he had never seen before. He didn't speak much English and had no job. He was bold and brave and willing to learn.

It is evident that this student gave "close attention" to the Thomas text, effectively using the folktale-based simile to position his great-grandfather as an extraordinary figure who, like Captain Kirk, explored unknown geographical, economic, and linguistic territories armed with courage and curiosity. To nudge this writer further into critical literacy, he could be encouraged to question why he selected Captain Kirk as a metaphor and why he chose to mention that his great-grandfather "didn't speak much English" rather than stating that he spoke Italian.

Only through critical reading can we develop the critical writers needed to act as citizens able to reason and evaluate the issues of the day. The deep reflection and unpacking of assumptions required by critical writing make achievable our goal of helping our middle school students meet the new, more rigorous Standards.

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