

BOOK NOTES

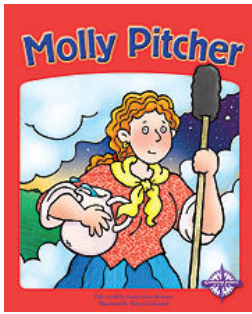
Center for Children's/YoungAdult Books

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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Not very long ago, biographies of women seemed to offer a limited number of choices for readers. Clara Barton, Pocahontas, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Amelia Earhart were among those whose lives were documented for young readers. Although biographies of those women continue to appear, the lives of many others now receive attention as well. This issue of Book Notes surveys a number that appeared in 2004.

Compass Point Books (Capstone) has introduced an interesting series of picture books about American Legends. The picture book, Molly Pitcher retold by Larry Dane Brimmer sheds light on womens' roles in the Revolutionary War. The story starts on a June morning in 1778 near the Monmouth Courthouse in New Jersey, when the day was



“...as hot as a blacksmith’s forge!” Despite the heat, the American troops went to battle against the British troops. When one of the American soldiers went down, Mary (Molly) Hays McCauley spied her pewter pitcher and knew what she could do for her country. Mary filled her pitcher, ran through the fighting, and began distributing water to the American troops. As she ran, soldiers yelled, “Molly! Pitcher!” This act earned Mary the legendary name, “Molly Pitcher.” Young girls and boys will be inspired by Molly’s acts of courage and will enjoy the cartoon-like drawings. Teachers can use this book as an interactive lesson. It includes a

recipe for corn cakes, a glossary, website information and the address of Monmouth Battlefield State Park.

Just over a century later, during the Civil War, another courageous woman who served her country on the battlefield earned the title “Angel of the Battlefield.” Clara Barton was the angel who braved battle scenes to tend the wounded. The chapter book, Clara Barton: Spirit of the Red Cross by Patricia Lakin (Simon & Schuster) gives the reader a glimpse of this wartime hero. Beginning readers will enjoy the simplicity of this book as well as the colorful illustrations on every page. Clara Barton, the youngest of five children, was a shy and sensitive child. Her self esteem was enhanced when she could help others. When Clara was seventeen, her parents sent her to teach summer school. Once Clara joined the work force, she began to challenge women’s roles. She worked for the U.S. government patent office and began her own initiative for America during the Civil War. Clara was saddened to see some of her students fighting in the war. To help them, she sent letters asking people to donate food, clothing and medicine. There was a huge response. Clara collected these items and gave them to soldiers in need. Clara not only helped the wounded on both sides of the conflict but eventually traveled to Europe, started America’s first chapter of the International Red Cross, and gave speeches across the nation.

While Clara Barton tended to wounded soldiers, Catherine the Great led soldiers to war in a constant effort to expand Russia's borders and rule the world. Catherine the Great by Nancy Whitelaw (Morgan Reynolds) follows the life of Sophia Augusta Frederica from Germany to Russia, where she became the Czarina Catherine II of Russia. This fascinating book contains rich, historical value and beautiful photographs. Sophia Augusta Frederica was born into a royal, but impoverished family. Frederick the Great, matchmaker of Europe, sought out Sophia to marry the heir to the throne of Russia to



strengthen the ties between Prussia and Russia. At age 16, Sophia was baptized in the Russian Orthodox Church. Her name was changed to Catherine Alexeievna. The next day, Catherine, dressed in silver robes, married her cousin Peter, the son of Czarina Elizabeth I of Russia. Although Catherine wasn't fond of her husband, she worked hard to please Czarina Elizabeth I in hopes of one day taking the throne of Russia. Catherine studied hard, displayed wit and intelligence, and soon gained the favor of the Russian court. When Elizabeth died, Catherine usurped the throne from her husband and ruled Russia for 34 years. As a ruler, Catherine was highly influenced by the teachings of

Voltaire on Enlightenment. Catherine brought art and literature to Russia and allowed Russian culture to bloom. She opened schools, orphanages and the first public hospital and developed a commission on commerce to expand trade. Although Catherine was a philanthropic leader, she was also domineering; she battled many of the countries that surrounded Russia in order to expand her empire.

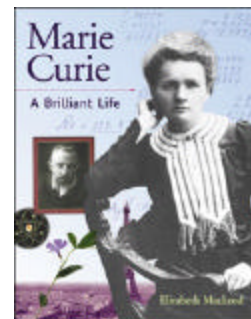
It is interesting to note the similarities between Catherine the Great and Eleanor Roosevelt. Both women married their cousins, were political leaders of their countries, and were philanthropic. Gare Thompson's book, Who Was Eleanor Roosevelt? (Penguin Putnam), gives the reader a personal account of Eleanor Roosevelt's life. Intermediate-level readers will enjoy and relate to the stories of Eleanor's childhood while the simple line drawings will help readers to visualize events. Eleanor's childhood was difficult; by the time she was 10 years old, both of her parents had died. Even though Eleanor's father was gone, he made a lasting impression on her. He taught her to appreciate nature, to question things and to care for other people. After her parents died, Eleanor lived with her strict grandmother until she was sent to Allenswood School in England when she was 15. Madame Souvestre, the director of Allenswood, allowed Eleanor to bloom as a student. Eleanor became a quick thinker and impressive debater. This gave her confidence. This confidence was probably one quality that drew the attention of her distant cousin, Franklin Roosevelt, to eighteen-year-old Eleanor when they met on a train ride in New York. Three years later, Eleanor and Franklin Delano Roosevelt were married. She was walked down the aisle by her Uncle Teddy Roosevelt, President of the United States! Eleanor helped Franklin become the Governor of New York and President of the United States by rigorously campaigning for him. All the while, Eleanor fought for better treatment of sweatshop laborers, volunteered for the Red Cross, worked for the rights of African-Americans, and eventually became the United States' delegate to the United Nations. She changed the face of politics by being the first first lady to



hold press conferences and travel all over the U.S. speaking about important issues. James Lincoln Collier's book about her, The Eleanor Roosevelt You Never Knew (Scholastic), contains much the same information as Who Was Eleanor Roosevelt? but also features historical photographs and full color paintings depicting scenes from her life.

Another woman who had a lasting impact on American life was Rachel Carson, particularly for her role in documenting and reporting the harmful effects of pesticides on birds. Elaine Landau explores her life and work in Rachel Carson and the Environmental Movement, part of the Cornerstones of Freedom series from Children's Press. Rachel's concern for nature began in childhood, when her mother took her on explorations in the woods near their Pennsylvania home. Rachel excelled as a writer and intended to major in English when she entered college in 1925. Although women were not encouraged to study science in that era, Rachel was inspired by one of her professors to change her major to biology. Rachel thought she could use her writing ability to encourage others to develop an interest in the natural world. After earning a master's degree from Johns Hopkins University, Rachel dropped out of school to help support her family. She managed to find two part-time jobs, one teaching at the university, and the other at the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, where she wrote radio scripts about marine life. Eventually she became a full-time biologist at the Bureau, but she also wrote articles about conservation for various journals. Her breakthrough piece, "Undersea," appeared in The Atlantic Monthly in 1937 under the name R.L. Carson so that readers would not know her gender. Eventually, she was able to write full time, and her book Silent Spring is credited with inspiring numerous people to come together to support environmental causes. Unfortunately, Rachel Carson died at the age of 56 in 1964, too early to realize the huge impact of her research and writings. Landau's introduction for middle-grade readers includes numerous photographs and "side bars" that expand information in the basic text. Although the use of bold type to identify glossary terms is a bit disruptive, in general the layout is inviting.

Elizabeth MacLeod documents the contribution of another scientist in Marie Curie: A Brilliant Life (Kids Can). Marie was the first woman to win a Nobel Prize in science and the first person to win the prize twice. When she was born in Poland in 1867, her father was a high school mathematics and physics teacher, and Marie enjoyed looking at his scientific instruments. The family encountered financial troubles after her father was demoted because he was not pro-Russian enough. Marie excelled academically and graduated at the top of her high school class. However, Polish women were unable to attend the University so Marie worked to send her older sister to a university in Paris and later joined her to pursue her own degree. She stayed in France the rest of her life. There she met her future husband, physicist Pierre Curie, with whom she pursued research. She earned a master's degree in mathematics and a doctorate in physics, completing pioneering studies on radiation. After Pierre's death, Marie was named to his teaching position at the Sorbonne, but she was barred from the French



Academy of Sciences, which had never admitted a woman. During World War I, Marie set up portable X-ray units that could be used by doctors at the front lines to help diagnose injuries. The numerous photographs that accompany the text enliven the account but also document the extremely difficult conditions in which Marie worked. The temperature and humidity in the laboratory spaces that the Curies used fluctuated constantly, and today their equipment would look primitive even in a high school. MacLeod helps readers realize the grueling work involved in making scientific progress. Ultimately, Marie paid with her own health because long-term exposure to radiation resulted in aplastic anemia, the illness from which she died.

Creative insights and achievement can take many forms as Melissa Eskridge Slaymaker reveals in Bottle Houses: The Creative World of Grandma Prisbrey (Henry Holt). She introduces readers to the world of Tressa Prisbrey, who was born in 1896 and began creating her bottle village in 1956. Working with bottles collected from the dump, she cemented them together to make a chapel, birdbath, houses for her pencil collection and doll collection, and other structures. She used shells, rocks, tile, bottle caps, and other odds and ends to construct pathways in her village. Julie Paschkis' illustrations glow with the exuberance and unique vision Prisbrey brought to her work. Preschool readers will enjoy the story of this grandmother with a whimsical sense of the world. Older children and adults, particularly those interested in art, will be fascinated by this introduction to a little-known creative spirit. Two pages of photographs of the Bottle Village and information about efforts to raise funds for its restoration are included as well as the url for its website. Who knows what artistic projects this book will inspire?



Another artist who defies convention is author Sandra Cisneros. Virginia Brackett writes about her life and work in A Home in the Heart (Morgan Reynolds), a biography for high school readers. Although Cisneros grew up in Chicago, she eventually found a home in San Antonio. Her uncertainty about how she fit into American and Mexican cultures contributed to her dissatisfaction with school, and her poverty added to her feelings of insecurity even after she was accepted at the prestigious University of Iowa Writers' Workshop graduate program. For years she struggled to find time for her own writing while teaching at schools and universities to make a living. Her decision to forego marriage and a family to concentrate on her writing reveals her determination to serve as a voice for Mexican Americans, particularly women. The text includes brief discussions of some of Cisneros' most widely-read books, including The House on Mango Street and could serve as background reading for classes that consider her works.

Among the most books most widely read by elementary students, particularly in the Midwest, are the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder. Readers who want an overview of how her books correspond to her life plus bonus information about "the rest of the story" can read William Anderson's Prairie Girl (HarperCollins). In 74 pages, Anderson summarizes the



life and work of the author who continues to bring pioneer days alive for readers. Renee Graef's black and white illustrations recall the work of Garth Williams found in Wilder's own books. Although this volume in no way substitutes for reading the actual novels, it does provide a succinct account of Wilder's life, including what happened after the original volumes in her series end.

Kem Knapp Sawyer offers background information on the life and circumstances of a young author whose writing is familiar to readers around the world. The biography of Anne Frank from DK uses the company's hallmark of copious photographs and other illustrations to accompany the text, but the book is the size of a standard paperback novel, not an oversized picture book. This format is more appropriate for the intermediate and junior high readers who are its likely audience. Sawyer places the story of Anne, her family, and the others who shared the hidden annex in Amsterdam in the broader context of the Nazi persecution of Jews throughout Europe. The heroism of those who helped the Franks and others survive for so long is juxtaposed with the barbarity of the concentration camps where all the annex inhabitants except Otto Frank perished. The book ends by documenting the discovery and publication of various versions of Anne's writings and the influence her work continues to have worldwide.

In fact, with the widespread knowledge of Anne Frank's diary, the documentary photographs of Nazi atrocities, and the accounts of concentration camp survivors, it is easy to assume that everyone involved in the crimes repented for their actions once Hitler was defeated. The fact that some of those involved in horrific acts against the Jews remained unrepentant until the end of their long lives is powerfully evident in Helga Schneider's memoir, Let Me Go (Walker). Schneider recounts her 1998 visit to a Vienna nursing home, where her 87-year-old mother was in failing health.



Her mother had abandoned Helga and her brother to join the SS in 1941 and later served as a guard in Auschwitz and Ravensbruck. Helga had visited her only once before, in 1971, when her mother had rejected both her daughter and grandson. Only her cousin's urging persuaded Helga to make one final effort to understand her mother's abandonment. The searing account of the nursing home visit reveals Helga's unresolved confusion and pain. What chills the reader is her mother's lack of remorse and her matter-of-fact acknowledgement of the torture and death in which she participated.

She remains convinced that she was part of a just and noble enterprise, following orders for the greater good of her country. Despite the innocuous cover photograph of four-year-old Helga, the audience for this disturbing account is senior high students and adults. The memoir could contribute another perspective to discussions of the Holocaust and its willing participants.

To examine these biographies and many others published recently, stop by the CCYAB in the Educational Resource Center. These books will be on display until the start of next semester.