

Vittoria La Matta

Mrs. Lindsey

Writers Workshop

02/01/2021

Analysis of Jefferson Children's book Selection at St. Catherine's Library

Thomas Jefferson is not only remembered as the third president of the United States but as the author of the Declaration of Independence, inventor, musician, architect and father. He was an extraordinary man with an insatiable hunger for knowledge. Recently the picture-perfect image of Jefferson has been tainted, as historians have brought to light that Jefferson held problematic beliefs. Jefferson owned slaves and could not imagine free slaves living in the American Nation. These actions go against the words written in our Declaration of Independence “that all men are created equal.” Therefore, authors must shift away from the heroic portrayal of Jefferson and focus on showing the founder in a more realistic light. It is crucial to give children a more holistic understanding of Thomas Jefferson and hold him accountable for everything he did. With that in mind, more recent titles in the Saint Catherine's Library like *Thomas Jefferson* by Cheryl Harness and *Thomas Jefferson* by Judy Emerson are more successful in their approach towards Jefferson. *Young Thomas Jefferson* by Francene Sabin, while a good book, it is a little outdated, and the last two books in our selection, *Who Was Thomas Jefferson?* by Dennis Brindell Fraden and *Thomas Jefferson* by Rick Burke, are not suitable for our St. Catherine's library as they don't portray our founder accurately.

Highly Recommended Books

The first three books summarize Jefferson's life and help the audience better understand who he was as a person. Not only are they factually accurate, but they also do not omit some of the more controversial aspects of Jefferson's life. Published in 2004, *Thomas Jefferson* by Cheryl Harness provides a well-rounded take on our founder. The book avoids painting Jefferson in a heroic light and instead explains how he was a man of his time. The book begins with a note from the author explaining how Jefferson's beliefs went against actions in his life. This book also discusses Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings and questions the nature of their relationship by asking "Were Thomas and Sally in love, or was this a case of the master exploiting a slave" (Harness 7)? There is no way to know what this relationship looked like, so authors must bring it up. Masters tended to exploit their slaves, so this relationship must not be romanticized. Overall, this book is a good option for children as it does not hide anything Jefferson did, but tries to explain Jefferson's accomplishments. The next book in our library, *Thomas Jefferson* by Judy Emerson, gives a simpler recap of Thomas Jefferson's life. Intended for a younger audience, this book gives a summary of Jefferson's life instead of going into depth about certain topics about his personal life. The book discusses how he was the author of the Declaration of Independence, the third president of the United States, and a lawyer among many other things. Although it is simple, the book does bring up that slaves "worked" at Monticello (Emerson 9). Bringing the topic up allows the audience to make the connection that although Jefferson believed in equality, he owned slaves. Sometimes being too bold about an issue like this might not sit well with a younger audience, so mentioning it briefly can help children understand the controversies in Jefferson's life. The one issue with this book is that it is intended for a much younger audience, and therefore is not the best resource for extensive research on Jefferson. Instead, it can be used to give readers a good introduction to the founder. The book

Young Thomas Jefferson by Francene Sabin is the oldest book in the collection. It was published in 1986 when Thomas Jefferson was not as controversial and seen as more of a hero. Sabin is very successful in giving the audience an understanding of Jefferson's upbringing, as he focuses on his childhood. *Young Thomas Jefferson* shows children how Jefferson was hungry for knowledge, and how his childhood shaped him into who he became. While this book is effective in explaining the founder's childhood, we should be critical as it does not go into important aspects of Jefferson's life. If this book is kept in our St. Catherine's library, it should not be the only book that children read about Jefferson.

Books to Avoid

The two other books in our collection paint an overly heroic picture of Thomas Jefferson. *Who Was Thomas Jefferson*, written by Dennis Brindell Fraden, discusses how Jefferson felt guilty because he did not "live by his words" (Fraden 3). It's true that Jefferson did not live up to his words, but it is inaccurate to suggest that Jefferson felt an immense amount of guilt because of it. Jefferson believed that "all men are created equal" but that slaves were indeed lesser than white men (Boles 1). While the book attempts to explain that Jefferson's ideas were problematic, it still sends the wrong impression to readers. Children should not be told that Thomas Jefferson felt guilty about his actions— this just feeds into the heroic portrayal of him. Jefferson's actions should not be justified; instead, authors should try to help people understand why he believed what he believed. Along with this, Dennis Brindell Fraden makes an unsuccessful attempt to portray Sally Hemings' and Jefferson's relationship. During his time in France, Thomas Jefferson started a relationship with his slave Sally Hemings. They grew close and ended up having six children together. Fraden writes that Sally Hemings came to Paris with Jefferson's

daughter “Maria” (Fradin 56) when it was actually “Polly” (Boles 151) who came with him.

While a small detail, people should be held accountable for factual inaccuracies no matter how big or small. In addition to this inaccuracy, the book takes a very strong stance on the nature of Sally and Jefferson's relationship. Fradin writes that because Jefferson was Sally's master, she had to do “do what he wanted” (Fradin 57). The exact nature of Sally and Jefferson's relationship is unknown, but the Hemings family does suggest that their relationship was “consensual” and founded on “love” (Boles 265). Again, there is no way of truly knowing what happened with Jefferson and Hemings, so it is misleading to claim that this relationship was forced, or even to discuss that this was a relationship of true love. The book *Thomas Jefferson* by Rick Burke also depicts Jefferson as too much of a hero. Burke attempts to bring up slavery by writing that some things about Jefferson “seem strange” (Burke 4). The book then states that he owned slaves, but “helped stop the buying and selling of slaves” (Burke 4). While Jefferson did free some of his slaves, he could not imagine blacks as American citizens “participating in governance” (Boles 78). Jefferson was unable to imagine a world where blacks and whites lived together peacefully, which the book does not discuss. The topic of slavery is difficult to discuss with children, but authors should attempt to explain how Jefferson was not the man people believed him to be. Jefferson's story must be told within the context of his time, which is why these books are not suitable for our collection. Burke also wrote that Jefferson dreamed of a country in “which everyone would be equal” (Burke 2). Thomas Jefferson dreamed of a country in which all white people would be equal, as his plan for future America did not involve freed black people. Burke also claims that Jefferson was able to write so well that it helped Americans “realize why they were fighting for their freedom” (Burke 28). While this is true, there was a group of Americans who were not truly free and would not be for a while.

It's not easy to approach difficult topics such as slavery and affairs with a younger audience. Writers need to be careful to not go to one extreme and leave out some darker aspects of a person's life, or go towards the other extreme and present too much information. Being too upfront might not be a successful approach for children as they might be too young to understand. A good approach is to always present historical figures in a holistic light. Books should never try to romanticize or write about a character as if they were a prince or princess in a Disney movie. While Jefferson was a great thinker and a man who did incredible work for this country, he fell short in other aspects. His beliefs can't be ignored just because they were uglier or because historians want Jefferson to be remembered as a hero. Children need to understand that Jefferson made mistakes and that just because he was a person in power, he can't get away with his actions. Everyone needs to be held accountable.

Works Cited

Burke, Rick. *Thomas Jefferson*. Heinemann Library, 2003.

Emerson, Judy. *Thomas Jefferson*. Capstone Press, 2004.

Fradin, Dennis. *Who Was Thomas Jefferson?* Paw Prints, 2011.

Harness, Cheryl. *Thomas Jefferson*. National Geographic, 2004.

Sabin, Francene, and Robert Baxter. *Young Thomas Jefferson*. Troll Associates, 1986.