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Analyzing Children's Biographies: Abraham Lincoln

One of the most well known presidents in United States history, Abraham Lincoln has long since become a legend. He seems to be the epitome of the American dream: the son of a poor farmer born in a log cabin who worked his way to the highest office in the nation. He is most famous for his leadership through the Civil War and for his work to free the slaves through the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment. Like all legends, as Lincoln's story has been told over the years, the portrayal of him as an almost god-like figure has led to misconceptions and myths about his motives and beliefs. Certain biographies of Lincoln better identify and correct these mistakes than others. In the St. Catherine's Montessori library, books such as *DK Biography: Abraham Lincoln, A Photographic Story of a Life* by Tanya Lee Stone and *American Lives Abraham Lincoln* by Rick Burke discuss the complexity of Lincoln's character successfully. Books such as *Who Was Abraham Lincoln?* by Janet B. Pascal and *Abraham Lincoln: Lawyer, Leader, Legend* by Justine and Ron Fontes also effectively aid the reader in understanding Lincoln's life. Most books in the library do attempt to discuss the intricacies of Lincoln; however, some books are not as successful, such as *Meet Abraham Lincoln* by Barbara Cary.

Books to Avoid

In writing a children's book, the author must always be conscious of the reading level of their audience and convey information in a way that is friendly to said reading level. It can easily become an issue when the book is too complex and children are unable to understand the information. However, it can also be a problem when the information in the book is oversimplified. That is the case with the book *Meet Abraham Lincoln*. It was written in 1989, which could have influenced the author's knowledge about Lincoln's views. Because Lincoln's legacy is so intricately tied to slavery, he is often presented as a hero who spent his presidency fighting against the injustices of slavery. Lincoln's work was essential for the abolition of slavery in the United States, but his views on the matter changed significantly over time and for much of his life were ideas that are now condemned, such as the recolonization of freed slaves. It wasn't until recently that the general public began to have discussions about Lincoln's views on slavery and African Americans, so it makes sense that a book written 30 years ago may not have the same information as one written 10 years ago. *Meet Abraham Lincoln* does the minimum in that it doesn't paint Lincoln's views on slavery as ideal, but the book does not deal with the concept of slavery as a whole very well. It defines slavery by stating that farmers "bought black men and women to work in their fields. They made the blacks their slaves. A slave had to do anything his owner told him to" (Cary 6). It is understandable that a children's book would not go into detail about the horrors of slavery. However, a child could easily read this description and not see anything wrong with it; it's too oversimplified. Most of the rest of the book is written like this as well. Because of the simplistic nature of the book, the author ends up writing the stereotypical version of Lincoln's story that most of the country has now moved past. In addition to this, the book does not contain any of the photographs, timelines, or helpful background

information that the other children's books in the library provide. While *Meet Abraham Lincoln* may be a good reading level for very young readers, there are certainly better options.

Recommended Books

Some of these other options include *Abraham Lincoln: Lawyer, Leader, Legend* and *Who Was Abraham Lincoln? Abraham Lincoln: Lawyer, Leader, Legend* was written in 2001, which likely allowed the author to incorporate modern perceptions about Lincoln into their writing. The information is presented in simple terms, but it is historically accurate and introduces factual information in a way that isn't trivialized. The author is able to depict Lincoln in a way that conveys his achievements but shows that he wasn't a perfect person. The book also deals with slavery in a much better way than *Meet Abraham Lincoln*. This book's definition is "the practice of owning slaves, which means keeping, buying, and selling human beings for the purpose of forcing them to work against their will and not for their own benefit" (Fontes 48). It does not go into the atrocities committed during this time period because it is written for children, but it defines the practice in a way that children are able to recognize it as wrong. This book is a great substitute for *Meet Abraham Lincoln*. A similar book to this would be *Who Was Abraham Lincoln?* This book was written in 2008 and is targeted towards children of a slightly higher reading level. It has all the same pros of *Abraham Lincoln: Lawyer, Leader, Legend*, only it goes into much more detail about Lincoln's life and beliefs. It is very well done and should be recommended to any child who fits the reading level. It confronts Lincoln's views on slavery in a particularly impressive way, and it states clearly that "he held some opinions that are hard to accept today." The author also acknowledges that "almost from the moment of his death, Lincoln became a larger-than-life figure," which is not something that many books do, especially

children's books that often characterize their subjects as heroes (Pascal 97). The only thing to be cautious of is a few instances where events are portrayed in a slightly misleading way or are glossed over. For example, the book mentions that Lincoln left politics early in his career and gives the reason that he was no longer interested in politics (Pascal 30). This is not true: he left because he did not win reelection due to his stance on the Mexican-American War. There are a couple of other instances where information is slightly misleading, but not enough to completely discredit the book.

Highly-Recommended Books

While most biographies of Lincoln have several drawbacks, *American Lives Abraham Lincoln* and *DK Biography: Abraham Lincoln, A Photographic Story of a Life* do a fantastic job discussing the events throughout Lincoln's life and the complexities of his character as he aged. *American Lives Abraham Lincoln* is the perfect book for young children to get a basic picture of Lincoln. It is historically accurate without any significant omissions, and it is very honest about Lincoln's struggles and difficulties with leadership both as president and as Commander in Chief. It also presents the complexities of his views on slavery in a way that is easily understandable for young children. Several children's books on Lincoln emphasize slavery as one of Lincoln's primary concerns for the war, but this one puts particular emphasis on the fact that Lincoln's biggest goal was "to save the Union. If that meant freeing no slaves, all slaves, or some slaves, Lincoln would do it" (Burke 18). This effectively clears up any misconceptions the reader could have around Lincoln's goals during the war. *DK Biography: Abraham Lincoln, A Photographic Story of a Life* has similar benefits, only it is much longer and more detailed. This book is fantastic for children with a high reading level who are looking to examine Lincoln and

his life much more closely. It provides quite a bit of detail about what was going on in the country at the time, the status of the war throughout Lincoln's presidency, and the prominent people in the political arena. There is also quite a bit of information about Lincoln's marriage, his children, and his daily struggles that makes him appear more human. The book highlights his journey in gaining presidential experience and his development in thought regarding slavery, particularly with his recolonization plan for freed slaves (Stone 74-75). By going into this greater level of detail, the book allows readers to understand Lincoln's character and the beliefs and desires that motivated him throughout his life. Both of these books should be highly recommended to students.

Overall, while all biographies of Abraham Lincoln in the library provide an overview of his life, certain books do it better than others. The *DK Biography: Abraham Lincoln*, *A Photographic Story of a Life* and *American Lives Abraham Lincoln* are fantastic resources for young readers to learn about the 16th president of the United States. *Abraham Lincoln: Lawyer, Leader, Legend* and *Who Was Abraham Lincoln?* are also wonderful options. Although *Meet Abraham Lincoln* gives the reader all the necessary information, it is incredibly oversimplified. The other books give a much more realistic picture of Lincoln while also catering to a young child's reading level, so this book would not be missed if it was removed from the library.

Works Cited

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