

Biography from a Variety of Perspectives

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Understanding multiple perspectives—how different people see one another and events now and in the past—is often cited as a goal of social studies educators. When upper elementary students deal with a range of perspectives on people and events, “it begins the process of empathy and sets students up to become ‘bigger than themselves,’ to live more widely than their young lives can allow.”¹ Understanding the perspectives of people from the past is “a fundamental aspect of historical understanding.”² In a survey of articles appearing in *Social Studies and the Young Learner* from 1988 to 2000, editor Sherry Field, concluded that “elementary social studies teachers understand that children can and do learn to take perspectives at a young age.³ Like these teachers and researchers, I have observed that upper elementary school children are able to consider multiple perspectives of people and events from the past if they are given teacher support and sources of information that stimulate their thinking.

This article describes one way to encourage children to consider a variety of perspectives on a person's life story, using a literary model as a guide to thinking about the past. To be useful in the social studies classroom, a work of literature must support thinking about powerful themes and ideas in ways that extend children's learning of social studies.⁴ It must not distract children or lead them into superficially related activities.

Bessie Coleman as Seen by Those Who Knew Her

We selected *Talkin' About Bessie*,⁵ a Notable Social Studies Trade Book and a Coretta Scott King Award winning book, to teach students about perspective-tak-

ing. This book clearly presents different perspectives on the life of the famous black aviator Bessie Coleman. It begins with a brief introduction describing the context of Bessie's world—a time of Jim Crow laws and racial segregation, but also a time when the Wright brothers were making aviation history.

Following the introduction is a brief statement from the author explaining that the book is a fictionalized account of a wake—the day when family and friends gather to mourn Bessie Coleman's death. It is a series of brief descriptions of Bessie “written” by many different people who knew her—including family members, friends, an employer, a classmate, a newspaper reporter, and others. Through their eyes, readers are able to “see” different aspects of Bessie's life and times and, in the end, construct a complex understanding of her life. This book shows, in a very concrete way, that different people saw Bessie Coleman differently.

After students have read *Talkin' About Bessie* (or have taken turns reading it aloud) and the class has discussed its narrative style, the teacher challenges students to compose a similar biographical account, applying the same literary technique to another historical person. For example, one student, Maeghan, chose to study the life of another famous woman—champion swimmer Gertrude Ederle. She explored what other people thought about Ederle's ambition and accomplishments, organized what she had learned, and then wrote a booklet of her own about Gertrude Ederle in the multiple-perspectives style (in which more than one narrator tells the story). To do this, she followed a series of steps established by the teacher.

Step 1: Research the Subject. Maeghan first read *America's Champion Swimmer*⁶ about the life and times of Gertrude Ederle, the first woman to swim the English Channel. Despite skepticism from the press and even a remark from her mother that she was “a plain home girl,” Gertrude broke stereotypic notions that women were too weak to compete in athletics. Her accomplishment was major news. She was given a ticker tape parade down Broadway, and President Coolidge called her “America's best girl!”

After reading *America's Champion Swimmer* several times, Maeghan explored the Internet and found many articles about Gertrude Ederle. One of the interesting things she discovered was a discrepancy in the telling of her biography. According to the account in *America's Champion Swimmer*, Gertrude's father taught her to swim by tying a rope around her waist, throwing her into the water, and telling her to paddle like a dog. In contrast, according to an article on the Internet,⁷ it was her mother who gave her this rough swimming lesson.

When we discussed the different accounts of these events, Maeghan said she thought it was most likely the father who threw Gertrude into the water; the mother thought Gertrude was “a home girl” and should remain at home. (As you will see, this interpretation later found its way into Maeghan's book.)

Step 2: Write the Introduction. Students had the assignment to write about a historical figure from multiple perspectives, and they returned to the literature to help them begin writing. The introduction to *Talkin' About Bessie* is an excellent model for thinking about the historical context in which a person lived. In a one page, three-

paragraph description of Bessie’s world, author Nikki Grimes develops the following information:

- Paragraph 1: Bessie was born in a segregated society (her social world).
- Paragraph 2: She was a young girl when she learned about Orville and Wilbur Wright’s first successful flight (girlhood aspiration).
- Paragraph 3: She became a pilot at a time when the job meant performing death-defying stunts as a “barnstormer” (accomplishment in adulthood).

Maeghan started her own booklet by using this same three-paragraph format, as outlined on a planning sheet:

Gertrude Ederle was born in New York City in 1906, at a time when _____.

As a young girl, Gertrude (or Trudy, for short) almost drowned when _____.

Gertrude Ederle was America’s champion swimmer because _____.

This framework enabled Maeghan to tell what she knew about the historical context and, in turn, provide her readers with some necessary background information (figure 1). Maeghan’s first paragraph explains how women were treated in 1906. Her second paragraph describes a defining moment in Trudy’s childhood—learning to swim. Her third paragraph tells about how, as an adult, she swam the English Channel and was celebrated as a champion.

Step 3: Create Multiple Perspectives. After carefully examining the multiple perspectives offered in *Talkin’ About Bessie*, Maeghan listed some of the people who could have commented on Gertrude Ederle’s life, including Gertrude’s mother, father, sister, first trainer, second trainer, newspaper editorial writer, New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker, President Calvin Coolidge, and Trudy herself. Maeghan selected a few key people from this list (the mother and father) and planned the main part of her book around their observations.

Maeghan used a sheet of lined paper to jot down ideas about how each person might remember about an event in Trudy’s

life, followed by a brief final comment or remark that person might make. She also sketched her ideas for illustrations—one small illustration to accompany the written text and one full-page illustration.

Interpreting the Evidence

A look at some of the pages in Maeghan’s finished booklet shows that she was not simply repeating facts she had gathered from various sources. Instead, she was interpreting these facts for herself. The passage she wrote from the point of view of Trudy’s mother and its accompanying illustration (figure 2) show that Maeghan had made up her mind about discrepancies between the mother’s and the father’s recollections concerning how Trudy had learned to swim. Weighing the conflicting information, Maeghan found the account in *America’s Champion Swimmer* by David Adler to be more credible than that found on the website. Maeghan’s writing and illustration about Trudy’s father (figure 3) echoes Adler’s view that Trudy’s father taught her how to swim by throwing her into the water with a rope around her waist and encouraging her to paddle like a dog.

According to Adler, Trudy’s mother had once described her as “just a plain home girl.” Maeghan saw this phrase as strong evidence of her mother’s reluctance to put Trudy in the limelight. Maeghan eagerly sifted and evaluated the evidence from the book and websites, a process that author Russell Freedman describes this way: “It’s impossible to write about anyone, any event, in any period of time, without in some way imposing, even unconsciously, your own standards, your own values. You simply can’t avoid that.”⁸ Maeghan was asserting her right to interpret the facts as she understood them. And while this stance may not be the last word about who taught Gertrude Ederle to swim, it provided an invaluable opening for student and teacher to discuss conflicting sources—an important experience for students to have, beginning in elementary school.

History Seen Through Many Eyes

This list is a sampling of literature (historical fiction) for young adults that employs multiple or unconventional perspectives.

Fleischman, Paul. *Bull Run*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993. Sixteen different characters tell about this Civil War battle.

Garland, Sherry. *Voices of the Alamo*. New York: Scholastic, 2000. The Alamo, from 1500 to the present, as described by a Payaya maiden, a conquistador, a monk, a Spanish soldier, a Tejano rancher, and others.

Hesse, Karen. *Witness*. New York: Scholastic, 2001. People in a Vermont town respond to the arrival of the Ku Klux Klan in 1924.

Pinkney, Andrea Davis. *Abraham Lincoln: Letters from a Slave Girl*. New York: Winslow Press, 2001. Fictional letters exchanged between a slave girl and President Lincoln provide distinct perspectives on the Civil War era and the Emancipation Proclamation. Other titles in the Dear Mr. President series include *John Quincy Adams: Letters from a Southern Planter’s Son* by Steven Kroll (2001), *Franklin Delano Roosevelt: Letters from a Mill Town Girl* by Elizabeth Winthrop (2001), and *Theodore Roosevelt: Letters from a Young Coal Miner* by Jennifer Armstrong (2000).

Wolff, Virginia Euwer. *Bat 6*. New York: Scholastic, 1998. In 1949, the girls on two opposing baseball teams in Oregon describe the effect of the Japanese internment and World War II on their community.

Yolen, Jane. *Encounter*. New York: Voyager Books/Harcourt Brace, 1992. The arrival of Columbus in the Americas as seen by a Taino youngster.

_____. *My Brothers’ Flying Machine: Wilbur, Orville, and Me*. New York: Little, Brown, 2003. In the voice of Katharine Wright, the author relates how the famous brothers made aviation history. At the same time we learn about Katharine’s involvement and support in their projects.



Figure 1
Gertrude Ederle was born in New York City at a time when women were not allowed to swim in public places and restaurants and were

Gertrude Ederle as Seen by Those Who Knew Her

Other pages in Maeghan’s book provided perspectives of other significant people—such as Trudy’s sister Margaret, who encouraged Trudy throughout her career; her first trainer, who pulled her out of the water despite her protests; her second trainer, who successfully worked with her; a newspaper reporter, who doubted her ability to swim the Channel; New York City Mayor Jimmy Walker, who marched in the ticker-tape parade honoring her and who lavishly praised her accomplishments; President Coolidge, who called her “America’s Best Girl.” Finally, Trudy herself “spoke” in the biography. In all, this project offered Maeghan the opportunity to consider nine different perspectives. She wrote about them all with the enthusiasm that comes from being an expert on a topic of interest.

Writing from Multiple Perspectives

Questioning historical material and writing original interpretations based on evidence and sources are beneficial activities for elementary school students. Students who are “history makers” learn new information while developing a sense of how we understand the past.⁹ After reading about Gertrude Ederle and then writing about her from nine different perspectives, Maeghan knows that which perspective one chooses to take makes a difference when learning about the past. She knows it in a way that only hands-on experience can provide.

Talkin’ About Bessie is an excellent example of a biography written from multiple perspectives. But a number of other children’s books highlight multiple or



Figure 2

unconventional perspectives on historical people and events (listed below). These works of historical fiction make history much more than a list of “facts and dates” because they focus on how people see and understand the facts. When listening or reading these books, and subsequently using them as models for writing, students not only learn information about the past, they also have the opportunity to exercise their historical imaginations. 📖

Notes

1. Tarry Lindquist, *Seeing the Whole Through Social Studies* 2nd ed. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 131.
2. Linda S. Levstik and Keith C. Barton, *Doing History* 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2001), 147.
3. Sherry L. Field, “Perspectives and Elementary Social Studies: Practice and Promise,” in O. L. Davis Jr., Elizabeth Anne Yeager, and Stuart J. Foster, eds., *Historical Empathy and Perspective Taking in the Social Studies*. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 130.
4. Janet Alleman and Jere Brophy, “Trade-Offs Embedded in the Literary Approach to Early Elementary Social Studies,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 6, no. 3 (1994): 6-8.
5. Nikki Grimes, *Talkin’ About Bessie: The Story of Aviator Elizabeth Coleman*, Illus. E. B. Lewis. (New York: Orchard, 2002).
6. David A. Adler, *America’s Champion Swimmer: Gertrude Ederle*. Illus. Terry Widener. (San Diego, CA: Harcourt, 2000).
7. Netherlands Open Water Web (NOWW), “Portrait: Gertrude Ederle,” www.noww.nl/info/port-ederle-gertrude.html.
8. Roger Sutton, “An Interview with Russell Freedman,” *The Horn Book Magazine* 78, no. 6 (2002): 697.
9. Myra Zarnowski, *History Makers: A Questioning Approach to Reading and Writing Biographies*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2003).

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It was



Figure 3

Trudy almost when she s a pond in B she visited he

I had to tie to swim so s be afraid an first lesson we had one en

Websites about Gertrude Ederle, Swimming Champion

Smithsonian Press—Legacies
www.smithsonianlegacies.si.edu/objectdescription.cfm?ID=99
 This website provides an illustration of the silver trophy awarded to Gertrude Ederle by William Randolph Hearst.

Frank Deford Viewpoint
www.sportsillustrated.cnn.com/2003/writers/frank_deford/12/03/viewpoint

A well known author, commentator on National Public Radio, and correspondent for HBO’s Real Sports describes Ederle’s historic swim and terms her accomplishment as “one of the grand achievements in sports.” Includes a 1926 photograph of Ederle.

NOWW: PORTRAIT Gertrude Ederle
www.noww.nl/info/port-ederle-gertrude.html

This biography of Gertrude Ederle claims it was Trudy’s mother who taught her how to swim by tying a rope around her waist. It also includes a detailed description of her reception in New York and her life after her famous swim.

A Look at Gertrude Ederle
www.msu.edu/~grawbur/iahweb.html

This brief biography of Ederle includes several interesting photographs. Several links to additional information, including Ederle’s autobiography.

Queens Chronicle
www.zwire.com/site/news/cfm?BRD=1861&dept_id=152382&newsid=10614161...

This obituary appeared in the *Queens Chronicle*, a local newspaper. The article describes her achievements but also provides information about Ederle’s connection to the borough of Queens, where she lived.

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Your perspective is shaped by the time in which you grew up and the career values that your family and society taught you. In approaching a job interview, recognizing that people of other generations may not share your career perspective will help you interact more effectively. You can show your respect for the power structures and culture of a new organization and conduct yourself as a person who has researched the organization and really wants to work there. Seek a Perspective. A career perspective may also be something that you want to find before you begin an education, training or work pr Turner soon earned a steady income through a variety of artistic endeavors, including selling designs to engravers, coloring sketches and providing private lessons. Among the artists who influenced his works during this period were Thomas Gainsborough, Henry Fuseli, Philippe Jacques de Louthembourg, Michael Angelo Rooker and Richard Wilson. Turner began traveling through Europe extensively and was particularly inspired by his visits to Venice.Â In 1807, Turner accepted a position as professor of perspective at the Royal Academy, where he lectured until 1828. He grew increasingly eccentric and secretive, avoiding contact with virtually everyone except for his father, and was embittered when Queen Victoria passed him over for knighthood.