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# ***Biographies in Focus: A Framework for Supporting Biographical Writing in the Classroom***

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Imagine it is time for your school's biography unit. The teaching team diligently prepares a multidisciplinary, goal-oriented unit involving writing, social studies, the arts, science, and math. The staff and students work for weeks: choose interesting subjects, learn relevant historical events, discern accurate from inaccurate information, differentiate main ideas from details, and cite sources in order to produce a final project. Despite our efforts, we may find while reading the biographies that many, too many, of our students' work seems stuck in a sea of tedious, date filled, "first this, then that" language even when presenting subjects as diverse as George Washington, Cleopatra, or Usain Bolt:

*George Washington was our first President. He was born in Virginia on February 11, 1731. He led the army in the Revolutionary War.*

*Cleopatra was born in 69 B.C. in Alexandria, Egypt and became a famous queen for about 20 years.*

*Usain Bolt is the world's fastest person. He is from Jamaica. He is 26 years old.*

These examples illustrate the difficulty in getting students (and some educators) to see biography in terms other than a glorified timeline. The research piece often overwhelms the written work and, in an effort to "get it all in," students wind up producing bland, date-filled recitations of facts—an elementary school version of the Wikipedia pages our own school librarians caution against.

When the Internet provides all the major events of a person's life to a student's fingertips in seconds, does biography still have a place in the curriculum? As children's authors specializing in biography, and as a professor and former classroom teacher of language arts instruction, we address the following questions regularly. Why is biography important? How does it fit into the core curriculum? How can it help in the new emphasis on informational text without getting bogged down in dates and places easily found elsewhere? Can we help students write biographies that are accurate, focused nonfiction while allowing for creativity and personality to shine? It is clear to us that elementary and middle school teachers need additional support to effectively integrate biographical writing into their curriculum. This article introduces a framework for "Biographies in Focus" that was developed from our professional experiences as biographers in children's literature, and our knowledge and practice of effective nonfiction writing instruction. We believe this method details a potential way forward toward teaching and learning biography in the age of the Internet while promoting the core curriculum standards for informational text.

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## The Importance of Biographical Writing

The goal of nonfiction writing is for students to convey accurate information that is fluent, clear, concise, and compelling. We also understand that nonfiction writing can help students connect with content and deepen their understanding of it, depending on the differing writing assignments in which students are asked to engage (Newell, 2006). But more broadly, a goal of biographical writing is to provide opportunities for students to expand, rethink, experience, value, and ultimately “go beyond our classroom walls and make connections with global ideas fashioned by people who might not even live in our country” (Dorfman & Cappelli, 2007, p. 7). Biographical writing gives students the opportunity to engage in inquiry-based learning. Teachers can establish an environment that allows students to ask key research questions that matter to them in order to find a focus for their biographies. These areas of focus may include a journey the subject took, one of the subject’s key interests, an object which was important to the subject, a significant character trait, time of life, or a relationship the subject had with another person. After selecting a focus, students need writing instruction on how to craft the biography.

Despite the usefulness of this approach, according to the results of a national survey, Gilbert and Graham (2010) found that language arts teachers provided little writing instruction for students and that the lack of writing and writing instruction was more pronounced in social studies and science. Such results are troubling given the new call for writing informative/explanatory texts. According to the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA Center) and Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) (2010), in order to be college and career ready writers, students must “become adept at gathering information, evaluating sources, and citing material accurately, reporting findings from their research and analysis of sources in a clear and cogent

manner. . . . [They] must take task, purpose, and audience into careful consideration, choosing words, information, structures, and formats deliberately” (p. 63). In this article, we describe a framework that supports writing and writing instruction of biographies. We discuss the writing process approach along with lesson ideas, and we include suggestions for using quality mentor texts to study expository text structures. Students need to be immersed in the reading of biographies in order to write them (Kristo & Bamford, 2004). Evidence also shows that reading nonfiction motivates students as they search for questions about their world (Guthrie, 1996; Guthrie & McCann, 1997; McMath, King, & Smith, 1998; Yopp & Yopp, 2000).

## Making the Connection: Our Responsibility as Biographers

As authors of biographies for children, our job is to convey the lives of our subjects to readers in such a way that readers make connections to the subjects as well as to their own lives. Finding these connections is not always easy. Some subjects lived in very different places and times from our modern day readers. Other subjects faced obstacles or did work difficult for young readers to understand. Still other subjects had so many complexities in their lives that they seem inaccessible to a young reader. Our job as biographers is to make these subjects and their achievements accessible and meaningful to students today. How do we achieve this? The answer involves several factors. We read many current and past biographies to determine which work best and evaluate them to figure out why they foster connections with the reader—or why they do not. We evaluate our own projects (with help from editors and, often, writer’s critique groups) to see what is most interesting and what will connect best with young readers. Are there common struggles, things which the young reader will understand? Are there common traits, qualities which make the subject seem closer, qualities

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that would bring subject and reader together? Are there failures, obstacles, or struggles which the reader could relate to or that the reader and subject may have in common, even if they take place in different circumstances? The goal of writing compelling biography is to remember the audience and find those connections that bring our readers into the triumphs, the struggles, the realness of another person's life. We argue that extensive focus on dates and timelines contribute little to making connections for students without the context that comes from connections to the subjects' humanity.

Through trial, error, and plenty of hard work, we came upon the following framework which works best for us in finding those connections to craft biographies for young readers. Using this framework, along with the evidence on effective writing practices, we believe that our recommendations have strong potential to work within the classroom as teachers guide students in the writing of biographies.

### **Prewriting Stage: Choosing the Subject**

Most educators today recognize the key components of the writing process: prewriting, drafting, revising, editing, and publishing (Graves, 1983). During the prewriting stage, motivation and enthusiasm are essential. Therefore, an essential part of biography writing is matching the "right" subject to the "right" writer. As authors, we are naturally drawn to certain life stories due to our own backgrounds, time of life, hobbies, experience, education, or personality traits. Whenever possible, student authors need to be allowed to choose the subjects that fit their particular personalities and interests. While understanding the need to cover certain curriculum areas, teachers point a student on the road to success by allowing him or her time to choose a biography subject that is of real interest.

In our method, students first choose an interest category (e.g., sports, environment, technology, heroes, animals, military, etc.) and

then find a person who fits into their interest as opposed to choosing a person and then trying to find something interesting about them. With guidance toward curriculum goals, whole classes or smaller groups can brainstorm more specific categories (e.g., home state heroes, women in science, children in history, etc.) and also potential subjects within each category. If curriculum dictates a more narrow approach (e.g., "The Presidents"), the class's hunt for people with interesting life stories should at minimum connect the student with the subject even in such simple ways as same first name, last name, or initials; ethnic or religious background; gender; hair or eye color; number of siblings; hobby; or area of the country (i.e., someone from our state or region of the country who became President).

### **Initial Investigation: Secondary Research to Get Familiar with Whole Life**

After students are given the opportunity to choose a specific subject, they need to begin building historical background knowledge to write compelling biographies. Here, the goal is for students to get an overall feel for the subjects they have chosen. Students will want to find out who their subject was as a person, including important traits and the general path of their lives. When gathering such information, students might consider answering the following questions: What was the feeling of their childhood or upbringing? Did this include major events that shaped them? and What other events were important in their lives? Students should find out their subjects' important achievements and any major obstacles or struggles. At this stage, using secondary sources, including respected sites on the Internet, encyclopedias, or other biographies is best (see Figure 1). The object is not to focus on any particular time of life or aspect of life but to get an overall feel for the subjects and their life journeys.

## Figure 1. Resources for Teaching Biography

### Primary Research Websites

History Matters – [www.historymatters.gmu.edu](http://www.historymatters.gmu.edu)

Library of Congress – [www.loc.gov/teachers](http://www.loc.gov/teachers)

National Archives – [www.archives.gov/education/lessons](http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons)

National Archives Digital Vault – [www.digitalvaults.org](http://www.digitalvaults.org)

### Primary Source Museums in Illinois

Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum – [www.alplm.org](http://www.alplm.org)

Art Institute of Chicago – [www.artic.edu](http://www.artic.edu)

Chicago History Museum – <http://chicagohs.org>

Listing of Illinois History Museums – [www.censusfinder.com/illinois-historical-museums.htm](http://www.censusfinder.com/illinois-historical-museums.htm)

### Primary Source Books

Hunt, Kimberly N. (2011). *Encyclopedia of associations. Vol 1: National organizations of the U.S.* (38th ed., 3 Parts) [Hardcover]; also on Web through most public libraries.

Vest, Kathleen. (2007). *Using primary sources in the classroom: Examining the past, understanding the present, considering the future.* Huntington Beach, CA: Shell Educational Publishing.

### Speak with Authors

<http://skypeanauthor.wetpaint.com>

### Interview Experts and Researchers/ Virtual Field Trips

List of dozens of virtual field trip destinations:

<http://crowleys.crs.c.k12.ar.us/dl/adventures.pdf>

### General Biography Sites

[www.biography.com/tv/classroom](http://www.biography.com/tv/classroom)

[www.aetv.com/class/biography/index.html](http://www.aetv.com/class/biography/index.html)

[www.kathleenkrull.com/teachers.html](http://www.kathleenkrull.com/teachers.html)

## Compiling Research: Exploring a Variety of Forms

When the initial broad research step is complete, many teachers feel the need to have students begin to write the biography. Our proposed method urges teachers not to rush students into

their final biography writing too quickly. The research needs to be compiled—not just in the typical form of notes taken from the sources, but in a creative, holistic sense that gives students a sense of the life as they now understand it and possible questions their research raised. A few of the ways research can be thoughtfully compiled include posters; mobiles; traced body shapes or cereal boxes with images and phrases representing major aspects of the subject's story; student written poetry about the subject, including major points and emotional impressions; or the creation of a physical biography in the form of a container that the student fills with items representing the life story. This step helps students remember the major facts, guides their interest in the subject, and primes their writing for the next, essential step in going deeper into the life story.

## Going Deeper: Asking Big Questions

Now students can take a good look at the subject they are getting to know and begin to ask questions. The pointed research questions below will help lead students toward choosing the area which they will have as a focus for their biographies. When they begin to ponder these questions, which of the answers do the students find most interesting? Which leads to more questions for which the students would enjoy finding answers? Which is most likely to lead to that common connection that we discussed earlier?

- What were their character traits? Did any particular traits lead them to success or failure?
- What things (ideas or objects) were precious to them and why?
- What did they want in their life and work? How did they get it?
- What were their interests? Did these interests lead to accomplishments?
- What did they believe in? What motivated them? What made them unique?

- How did they fail? How did they succeed? Why?
- Is there one event in their life that shows who they are, what they wanted, or what they accomplished?
- Are there any relationships they had that were key to their accomplishments?
- Is there a particular time in their lives that stands out as important? Why?

This is not a comprehensive list of questions; the teacher or students can think of others. The

object is to get the students thinking about the focus which would work best for their approach.

## Narrowing the Focus

The focus for the final biography project is a central component in our suggested method for teaching biography. All writing needs focus; and in a wide-ranging life story, focus is a necessity that turns the biography into a true story as opposed to a recitation of facts. By focus, we mean a central theme around which the

**Figure 2. Recommended Mentor Texts with Focus Categories**

Category	Example	Mentor Text
<i>Object</i> : an item that was important to the biography subject and illustrates the life in some essential way	Galileo's telescope Henri Matisse's scissors	<i>The Fantastic Jungles of Henri Rousseau</i> by Michelle Markel <i>Tille the Terrible Swede: How One Woman, a Sewing Needle and a Bicycle Changed History</i> by Sue Stauffacher
<i>Event</i> : a historic or special event in the subject's life that had wide reaching implications for the person's life	The Wright Brother's first flight Marion Anderson's concert at the Lincoln Memorial	<i>Gandhi: The March to the Sea</i> by Alice McGinty <i>Night Flight: Amelia Earhart Crosses the Atlantic</i> by Robert Burleigh <i>Queen of the Falls</i> by Chris Van Allsburg
<i>Time of Life</i> : a time in the person's life (childhood) or a journey that they undertook that sums up the life	Joe Louis beats Max Schmeling George Washington crosses the Potomac	<i>The Incredible Life of Balto</i> by Meghan McCarthy <i>Nurse, Soldier, Spy: The Story of Sarah Edmonds, a Civil War Hero</i> by Marissa Moss
<i>Another Person</i> : how the subject's relationship with another person shaped essential aspects of their life and accomplishments; sometimes called dual biography if both subjects are covered equally	Harriet Tubman meets Sojourner Truth Helen Keller lives with Annie Sullivan	<i>The Adventures of Mark Twain by Huckleberry Finn</i> by Robert Burleigh <i>When Bob Met Woody</i> by Gary Golio
<i>Interest</i> : an important hobby or interest that contributed to the subject's accomplishments	Lady Bird Johnson loved wildflowers Frida Kahlo draws	<i>Darwin</i> by Alice McGinty <i>The Dinosaurs of Waterhouse Hawkins</i> by Barbara Kerley <i>Thomas Jefferson Builds a Library</i> by Barb Rosenstock
<i>Character Trait</i> : an essential character trait that defines the person	Jackie Robinson's bravery Marie Curie's curiosity	<i>FEARLESS: The Story of Racing Legend Louise Smith</i> by Barb Rosenstock <i>The Watcher: Jane Goodall's Life with the Chimps</i> by Jeanette Winter <i>Wilma Unlimited</i> by David Adler & Terry Widener

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biography is built. From our review of recently published children's biographies, as well as our own experience as writers and teachers, we have delineated six potential focus categories that are at the heart of this method: (1) Object, (2) Event, (3) Time of Life, (4) Another Person, (5) Interest, and (6) Character Trait. What follows is a brief explanation of each focus category. (Samples of biographies for children that fall into each focus category can be found in Figure 2.)

Choosing focus is not a random act; not every life story lends itself to a particular focus. The Tell it Twice strategy (Rog, 2011) can be used during prewriting to help students clarify their thinking and determine focus. The steps for this are as follow:

1. Tell partner what you know about the life of person.
2. Invite questions and feedback from partner.
3. Reflect on your telling and your partners' feedback.
4. Make any adjustments and retell your ideas to a new partner.

By talking with others about their ideas, students may find focus based on whatever their partner finds most interesting, or students may determine focus by deciding which one part of their subject's life interests them. Teachers might also invite students to choose two different focus categories, write a paragraph for each, and determine which has more potential for a finished biography.

An interesting idea for a whole class biography project is for the class to choose one subject (e.g., Abraham Lincoln) and divide into six groups, with each group approaching the biography from a different focus. Examples from published literature targeted to the appropriate grade level can help act as mentor texts for writing biography using focus categories. In many cases, picture book biographies can be most helpful for this as they are "sophisticated,

abstract, or complex in themes, stories, and illustrations and are suitable for children aged 10 and older" (Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2005, p. 83). Picture book biographies can indeed serve as good models of quality writing. As Ray (2002) noted, "Every single text we encounter represents a whole chunk of curriculum, a whole set of things to know about writing" (p. 92).

Choosing a focus for a biography helps students' critical thinking as they discover the connections between the focus they have chosen and the life they are writing about. Focus also needs to be proven by evidence (Did Galileo really CARE about his telescope? How do you know?), requiring in-depth reading and research. Focus also helps in revising as it allows students to learn emphasis and detail by leaving out the parts of the story that are not essential to the topic at hand (if you are writing about Jacques Cousteau's diving inventions, you may need to minimize details of his work for the French resistance in World War II). Lastly, focus increases creativity by allowing emotional reactions to a factual story, which is the hallmark of the best nonfiction.

Once students choose a focus, what's the next step? Focused primary research. Students dive into the one aspect of the life that they have chosen by more in-depth reading on the specific chosen focus category. A key element which can guide students into this focused primary research is through developing topic-oriented research questions. For example, in the object category, students may focus their research by asking and writing the following questions: What color was Abe Lincoln's hat? When did he get it? How did he feel when he wore it? What events did he wear it to? Did he ever take it off? How do you know it was important to him? What happened to his hat? They may need to find experts among peers, school staff, or parents; research objects from museum collections (see Figure 1), films, or photographs that will help them learn and feel what life was

like for their subject; or interview experts from associations or use primary documents from Internet primary research sites. These methods can be used in service of answering targeted research questions and getting to the heart of their subject through their focus topic.

### Crafting the Story: Writing the Truth

After uncovering and identifying the main focus of the subject, students need to decide how to craft the life into a story, and how to tell their story in the best way. It is at this point that we must be reminded that “quality nonfiction writing can be taught if we provide appropriate

instruction and give young writers time to practice” (Murray, 1985, p. 4). Which writing format will they use: a report or essay, a picture book, letters, poetry, a video, a script, an article, or a blog? Who is the intended audience? How will they organize their writing? In general, no matter which focus or format students use, the elements they should include in the telling of the story remain the same. They should be crafting the life story to include elements such as the subject’s motivation (their wants and needs), obstacles, tension, and resolution.

In order to help students organize their writing, we have developed a story frame (see Figure 3). This example was filled out by a

**Figure 3. Biography Story Frame**

**Subject:** Genghis Khan

**Focus:** What Genghis Khan conquers and how he does it

**The story I’m telling about** (subject) Genghis Khan **begins when**  
Genghis Khan’s dad dies and then Genghis Khan takes command of the tribe.

**More than anything,** (subject) Genghis Khan **wants** world domination  
**because** he wants power and gold and food.

**This is not easy because** he only has a tribe and not an army.

**To reach his or her goal,** (subject) Genghis Khan **must**  
get an army and a superior weapon or knowledge.

**First,** (subject) Genghis Khan works and tells people they should enlist in his army.

**Next,** he has to plan out what to do for world domination and what to conquer first, like China and then Moscow and then Eastern Europe.

**After that** he has to discipline and drill his soldiers.

**The story ends when** Genghis Khan dies from age.

**Details to add as I write:** What was true about his loved ones  
Who would control those territories

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3rd-grade student as he planned a biography of Genghis Khan. The purpose of this planning is to give students something concrete to refer to, which will help them stay on track as they write. Students may also create outlines or story boards to help them plan and organize the important events which will form their biographies.

During this planning stage, emphasis should be put on creating a narrative arc for the life story. This should include a clear beginning where the subject and main motivator and goal may be introduced, a middle in which the subject attempts to reach that goal, and an end in which the goal is reached and resolution is found. Narrative arc can also be created through a focus on problem/solution and cause/effect. Asking students whether the main events described in their biographies stem from the subject's attempts to solve his or her problem or as a result of the subject's main motivation or goal will help to ensure this focus and help students create a more distinct narrative arc. When doing the actual writing, you may encourage the students to use active verbs, include details which help the reader picture the events in their minds (emphasize that all details must be factual and backed by research), and think about events as scenes. For example, instead of writing *Genghis Khan and his troops conquered the city of Moscow*, given a bit more research, a student may be able to create a scene such as this: *Genghis Khan and his troops arrived at Moscow at night. Quietly, they rode their horses close to the city, and then upon Khan's orders, they charged.* Encouraging students to write in scenes enforces the rule of *show, don't tell*. Their writing will be much more engaging if it shows action happening, instead of telling the reader what has already happened.

### Reading-Writing Connection with Nonfiction

To become an effective nonfiction writer, students need to acquire knowledge about the characteristics of quality nonfiction writing

as well as the different purposes and forms of nonfiction writing (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). One way to acquire knowledge about nonfiction writing is through reading. For example, when introducing students to biography writing, a good starting point is to read aloud several mentor text biographies and have students study the craft and technique to identify common features such as placing the person in a particular place and time. To develop as writers, students have to be careful readers so that they can learn how to improve their own writing (Hansen, 2001). Ray (1999) recommends five points to help students read like a writer:

1. *Notice* something about the craft of the text.
2. *Talk* about it and *make a theory* about why a writer might use this craft.
3. Give the craft a name.
4. Think of *other authors* you know. Have you seen this craft before?
5. Try to *envision* using this craft in your own writing. (p. 120)

To help students understand the key qualities of biography writing, teachers choose award-winning and other high-quality nonfiction biographies that are appropriate for students and that exemplify the traits of writing. These traits include ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation. Culham (2003) briefly describes the traits:

- **Ideas** – the meaning and development of the message
- **Organization** – the internal structure of the piece
- **Voice** – the way the writer brings the topic to life
- **Word Choice** – the specific vocabulary the writer uses to convey meaning
- **Sentence Fluency** – the way the words and phrases flow throughout the text

- **Conventions** – the mechanical correctness of the piece
- **Presentation** – the overall appearance of the work (pp. 11-12)

To teach a lesson on word choice, read the book, *FEARLESS: The Story of Racing Legend Louise Smith* (Rosenstock, 2010). Have students listen for and identify examples of onomatopoeia. Since choosing just the right word can be challenging for writers, it is often helpful to have a word bank to refer to when drafting. Students can use rhymezone ([www.rhymezone.com](http://www.rhymezone.com)) or a regular thesaurus to list words related to their focus, main character's traits, etc. Here is Barb Rosenstock's own example from drafting her book:

### **Word Bank for FEARLESS**

- **Courage** – bravado, bravery, continue, courageous, cowardice, craven, dash, desperate, display, encourage, endure, fainthearted, fearless, feisty, fortitude, frighten, gallant, gutless, gutsy, heart, hero, mettle, muster, nerve, spunk, stoic, support, uncomplaining, unconquerable, prove yourself, integrity, intolerance, nervous, prejudice, strength, spirit
- **Speed** – acceleration, brisk, burn-up, control, dart, dash, double quick, double time, drive, faster, fastest, fastness, flash, fly, flat out, freeway, hot, hot rod, headlong, hustle, pace, quick, race, rapid, rate, ready, rush, swift, tear, tempo, velocity, zip, zoom
- **Rights** – prejudice, freedom, liberty, justice, forward, suffragist, tyranny, truth, voting, chauvinism, femininity
- **Foolish** – crazy, hare-brained, scattered, tricks, dangerous, fantastic, lunacy, madness, stupid, silly, joke, wacky, unwise
- **Danger** – alarm, injury, death, alert, anxious, arresting, brave, bold, care, careful, caution, cautious, check, clear, coolness, crisis, daring, desperate, emergency, escape,

fear, fearfulness, fearless, foolhardy, game, grit, guts, hazard, jeopardy, menace, peril, plucky, power, preserve, protect, reckless, red light, rescue, risk, safe, secure, sheltered, stop, threat, turn back, awake, warning, anger, gamble

- **First** – last, middle, end, start, prime, starting point, birth, finish line
- **Automotive** – tire, wheel, seat, engine, death, friction, Daytona, dash, racing, floorboard, headlights, doors, ignition, start, stop, brake, luggage, road, riding, accelerator, crash, roof, window, windshield, coupe, sedan, stock car, machine, motorcar, traffic, vehicle, carriage, gear, hood, horn, throttle, movement, travel, squad car, cruiser, trunk, forward, reverse, bumper, stop & go
- **Sounds** – rumble, rattle, screech, squeal, vroom, crash, cough, clatter, growl, high pitched, loud, crunch, sputter, noisy, roar

A word bank developed before or during the writing process helps students improve some of the traits of writing such as word choice, sentence fluency, and voice.

Word banks also help students decide on larger themes in the biography subject's life (e.g., courage, persistence, musicality, love of nature), clarifies thinking about those themes, makes connections between themes, and provides interesting vocabulary that can move a student's writing along when faced with a case of "writer's block."

### **Final Thoughts**

Our focus on biographies provides an instructional framework as teachers work toward increasing the proportion of informational text in their curriculum. Biography writing can become an important genre of study to meet standards and literacy expectations in history/social studies. But ultimately, we want students to "write more willingly about situations that have reality—experiences that touch their

lives—or subjects that they have an aptitude for (Zinsser, 1993, p. 57). We hope that our framework will provide teachers with the tools students need to develop as talented, young biographers.

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Barb Rosenstock is an award-winning picture book author who loves true stories best. Her latest book, *The Camping Trip that Changed America*, is a Parents' Choice silver medalist, a BookList Top Ten Books on the Environment for Youth, a 2013 Bank Street Best Books of the Year, winner of the California Library Association Beatty Award, and a nominee for various state awards including the 2014 Illinois Monarch. She can be reached at [www.barbroosenstock.com](http://www.barbroosenstock.com).