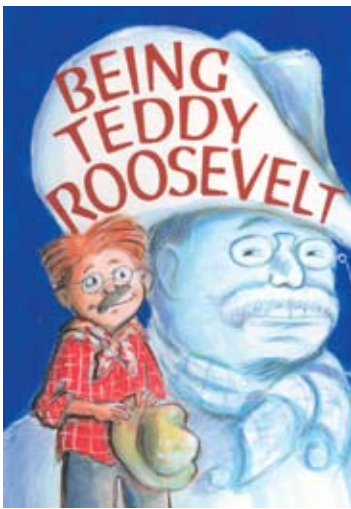


Children's Literature

Being Teddy Roosevelt: Exploring Biographies and Overcoming Life's Obstacles

Myra Zarnowski



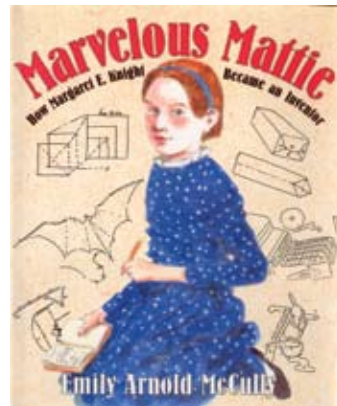
In Claudia Mills' recent book *Being Teddy Roosevelt*, the main character, Riley O'Rourke, is assigned to read a biography of Teddy Roosevelt and write a report about him.¹ This assignment is in preparation for participating in a "biography tea" with the other students in his fourth grade class who will all come dressed as the subjects of their biographical research.

While this event seems less than promising to Riley, what he learns from the experience transforms his life. Trying on Teddy Roosevelt's identity provides him with guidance for dealing with the challenges of his own life. He essentially asks himself, "What would Teddy Roosevelt do if he had my problems?" The answer, he discovers, yields just the practical advice he needs: only through self-reliance, initiative, and persistence can he achieve his goals. Or, as Riley bluntly observes, "Maybe nobody's life was easy. At least, nobody who got to be the star of a biography." Instead, the lives of biography "stars"—though not easy—can guide Riley in reaching goals that sometimes seem out of reach. The lives of others (to use the well-known phrase from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss) are good to think with as we consider our options.

This article describes recent biographies for children that, like the fictional *Being Teddy Roosevelt*, provide examples of how people overcome obstacles. As Riley tells us, "Obstacles overcome" was one of the main topics Mrs. Harrow [his teacher] wanted us to include in our reports. Without that, the reports would be pretty boring." Each of the books described below presents examples of obstacles overcome by historical per-

sons. Taken together, these examples show the various ways people succeed through strength of character. These books also address the social studies standards strands

IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY and VI CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES.²



Overcoming Negative Social Attitudes

In *Marvelous Mattie: How Margaret E. Knight Became an Inventor*, Emily Arnold McCully describes how even as a child Mattie had an interest in inventing.³ She made toys for her brothers, a foot warmer for her mother, and sleds for neighborhood boys. When her family

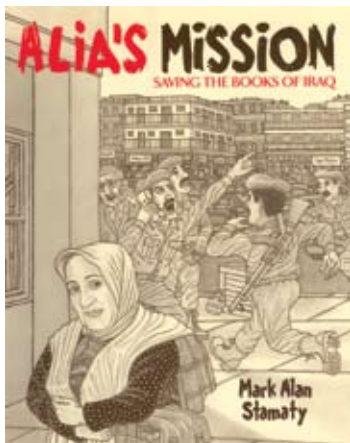
moved to Manchester, New Hampshire, so that her mother and brothers could work in the textile mills, Mattie investigated the machine shop there.

Once Mattie herself began to work in the mill, she observed a terrible accident. A neighboring worker was knocked unconscious when a shuttle from a loom flew off and hit her in the head. This accident prompted Mattie to design a guard that, when attached to a loom, secured the shuttle and prevented it from flying off like a missile.

It wasn't until Mattie was working in a paper bag factory in Springfield, Massachusetts, that she made the invention that gained her the title of "Lady Edison." She designed a machine that made paper bags with flat bottoms that stood upright for easy filling and did not easily rip. When an unscrupulous man tried to steal her idea, Mattie hired a lawyer, went to court, and was granted the patent rights to her machine. Then she went into business producing paper bags. She continued inventing

for the rest of her life.

Despite having only gone to elementary school, and despite the prevailing belief during her lifetime (1838–1914) that women could not be inventors, Margaret E. Knight made over ninety inventions and obtained twenty-two patents. Her persistence, creativity, and willingness to fight for her rights enabled her to overcome the social attitudes of her time that devalued the work and rights of women.



Developing a Community-Based Plan

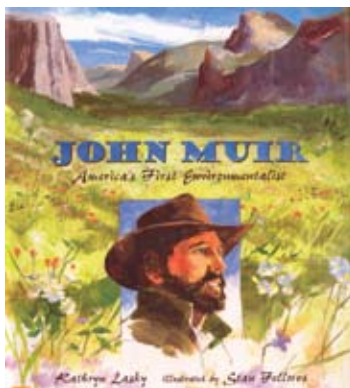
In 2003, when the invasion of Iraq by U.S. and British forces was imminent, the chief librarian of the Basra Central Library, Alia Muhammad Baker, realized that her beloved books were in danger. Soldiers with anti-aircraft guns were stationed on the roof of the

library, making it a bombing target. She knew that something had to be done to save the books that contained the precious history of her people.

In *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq*, Mark Alan Stamaty tells how Alia managed to save 30,000 books despite the refusal of government officials to assist her in this effort.⁴ Friends and local volunteers joined in the effort, hauling books from the library and placing them in their homes. When a fire burned the library to the ground, Alia was deeply saddened, but then she began to oversee the design and building of a new library. Despite suffering a stroke, Alia recovered and still persists in her efforts.

This true story shows how the collective efforts of the citizens of Basra overcame the very real obstacle of dealing with a chaotic and dangerous situation. What Alia could not do alone, she was able to do with the assistance of volunteers. Told in graphic cartoon panels by the political cartoonist for the

New York Times Book Review, this book is a wonderful example of triumph through community action. No wonder the author refers to Alia as a “real-life superhero.”



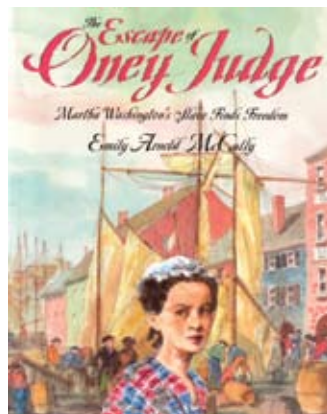
Pursuing a Lifelong Commitment

From his earliest years as a boy in Scotland, John Muir had a passion for the wilderness. The sights and sounds of nature intrigued him—the vividness of animals, trees, and stars, and the sounds of birds, wind, and water. As author

Kathryn Lasky tells readers in *John Muir: America's First Environmentalist*, Muir became so passionate about nature that he devoted his life to protecting and preserving it. The story of John Muir's life shows how his early personal enjoyment of nature led to a deep conviction that the environment needed to be preserved for the good of everyone. He ultimately became one of America's first environmentalists, working to counter the effects of overgrazing, land speculation, and sales of water rights on the wilderness.

How did John Muir succeed in turning his personal passion into social change? As a young man, he began traveling across the country to Florida, California, and Alaska, absorbing the natural landscape and taking jobs here and there: in a broom factory, a sawmill, and on a ranch. All the while, his fascination with nature increased, as did his understanding of how people lived across the country.

At age 50, John Muir's passion for nature developed into social action. He devoted his energies to the cause of conservation through writing and political activity. In 1892, he founded the Sierra Club to promote the enjoyment of nature, foster its responsible use, educate people about conservation, and use legal means to further all these goals. Through his efforts, Yosemite National Park was created and millions of acres of forest were preserved in their natural state. Because John Muir spoke out, wrote, and acted to preserve nature, he was able to preserve American wilderness lands.



Taking Risks to Achieve a Goal

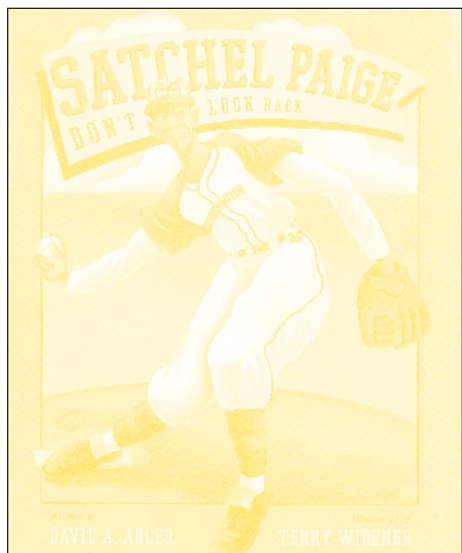
The Escape of Oney Judge: Martha Washington's Slave Finds Freedom by Emily Arnold McCully tells how a slave owned by George and Martha Washington managed, through daring and clear thinking, to find her personal freedom.⁵ Because Oney Judge was the personal maid to Martha Washington,

she traveled first to New York City, where George Washington was inaugurated president, and then to the nation's new capital of Philadelphia. There she saw for herself that former slaves were living in freedom. She also heard about Toussaint L'Ouverture, who led a slave revolt in Haiti. Oney's wish for freedom grew stronger.

When Oney learned that on Martha Washington's death she would be given to Martha's granddaughter, Eliza Custis (and possibly sold by Eliza's husband), she decided it was time to act. With the assistance of a free black family who were working with the Quakers to help runaway slaves, Oney Judge managed to board a ship sailing for Portsmouth, New Hampshire. While she lived a life of freedom in New Hampshire, she was still pursued by agents of the Washingtons, who tried to get her

to return to them. With the help of Senator John Langdon of New Hampshire, Oney escaped once again and lived out the rest of her life in freedom.

Each time she was pursued, Oney chose the risky path of running towards freedom, rather than giving in and going back to a life of slavery. Oney Judge's willingness to risk the dangers involved in running away from her famous masters enabled her to find the personal freedom she so strongly desired. Personal freedom was worth the risks involved.



Speaking Out About Injustice

In *Satchel Paige: Don't Look Back*, author David Adler explains that even though Satchel Paige was an exceptionally talented pitcher, the opportunities for him to advance as a professional player were closed to him because of

his race.⁶ Born in 1905 in Mobile, Alabama, Paige was limited to playing on black teams, with no possibility of playing in the major leagues.

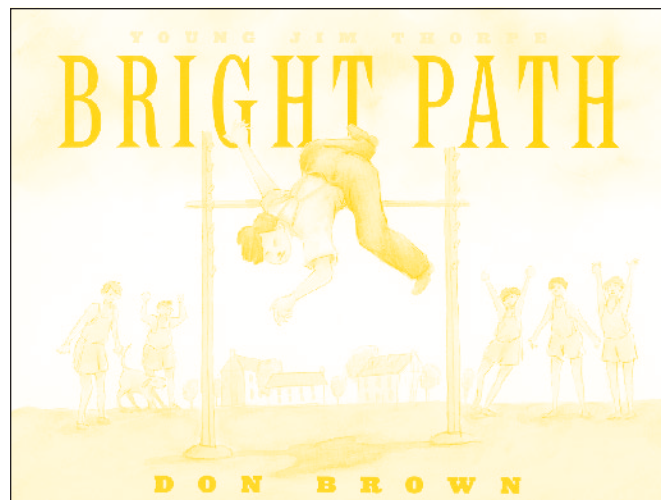
To his credit, Satchel Paige continued to play with the “Negro Leagues,” which had enthusiastic audiences of their own and were a venue for several great athletes of that era. Paige created his own unique pitches—the blooper, the looper, the drooper, and the whipsey-dipsey-do. Despite his skills as a player and the recognition he received from white players such as Joe DiMaggio and Ted Williams, Paige was not hired by the major leagues until after Jackie Robinson had broken the color barrier in baseball in 1945. Paige, at the age of 40, joined the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1947.

Not only did Satchel Paige persist as a player, but he also spoke out about racism. He spoke about African Americans being denied access to schools, restaurants, hotels and jobs. He spoke about the importance of equal opportunity for all. In his life, Satchel Paige followed his own advice: “Don't look back.” Instead of harboring resentment, he always looked forward, and in the end, he was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame. More importantly, while moving forward in his career, he voiced the conviction of African Americans that they deserved equal rights and opportunities to succeed.

Building on Personal Strengths and Abilities

Bright Path: Young Jim Thorpe by Don Brown tells how Jim Thorpe became a great athlete.⁷ Given the name *Wa-tho-huck*

at birth (which translates to “Bright Path”), Thorpe's initial prospects for success in life were limited. He was sent to several Indian schools whose purpose was to erase his Indian culture and replace it with the lifestyle and culture of white people. He was forced to speak English, wear a dark suit and hat, follow a strict schedule, and train to be a tailor. All of this made him so unhappy that he ran away several times from several different Indian schools.



What turned this depressing picture around? Jim Thorpe had always loved the outdoors. One day at school he asked to try the high jump. He was so successful that the school's coach, Pop Warner, began to train him for the track and football teams. Over time, Thorpe developed into such a successful athlete that he became an Olympic gold medalist during the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, winning the pentathlon (a five-event contest) and the decathlon (a ten-event contest). Jim Thorpe succeeded in developing his potential as an athlete. He followed the “bright path” that was true to his own preferences and abilities.

Biography and Character Traits

Theodore Roosevelt, the subject of Riley's investigation into biography, once said “to educate someone in mind and not in morals is to educate a menace to society.”⁸ Social studies can help children not only learn facts about the past, but also to consider the moral issues surrounding events and historical figures. What character traits enabled people to successfully deal with difficult issues?

Because biographies raise issues in context, they provide excellent material for thinking about character traits.⁹ Books like those discussed in this article show how people living in actual situations made decisions that helped them overcome obstacles. When discussing these books, we can ask students, “What obstacle did the person face? What did he or she do to overcome this obstacle? What do these actions show about the person's character? How can you apply the character traits you read about to the obstacles in your life?” These questions enable readers, like the fictional Riley in *Being Teddy Roosevelt*,

to consider the past experience of others while living their lives today. 📖

Notes

1. Claudia Mills, R. W. Alley, illus., *Being Teddy Roosevelt* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
2. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994).
3. Emily Arnold McCully, *Marvelous Mattie: How Margaret E. Knight Became an Inventor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).
4. Mark Alan Stamaty, *Alia's Mission: Saving the Books of Iraq* (New York: Knopf, 2004).
5. Kathryn Lasky, Stan Fellows, illus., *John Muir: America's First Environmentalist* (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 2006).
6. Emily Arnold McCully, *The Escape of Oney Judge: Martha Washington's Slave Finds Freedom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007).
7. David A. Adler, David Widener, illus., *Satchel Paige: Don't Look Back* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, 2007).
8. Don Brown, *Bright Path: Young Jim Thorpe* (New Milford, CT: Roaring Brook Press, 2006).
8. Stephan Ellenwood, "Revisiting Character Education: From McGuffey to Narratives," *Journal of Education* 187, (2006): 21.
9. Stephan Ellenwood and Kevin Ryan, "Literature and Morality: An Experimental Curriculum," in William M. Kurtines and Jacob L. Gewirtz, eds., *Handbook of Moral Behavior and Development, vol. 3: Application* (Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1991): 55-67.

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Activities for Students

Extending the Study of Character Traits

Using biographies like those described in this article as a starting point, students can take part in a number of activities to extend their understanding character traits. A few suggested activities for students are described below.

Activity 1: Obstacles and Character Traits Chart

After reading three or more biographies, use the chart on page 28 to collect information about people who overcame obstacles. Fill in the chart row by row. (Row 1 is an example.) Then you can use the chart to compare and contrast the character traits that enabled these historical figures to overcome various hardships.

Activity 2: My Day With a "Biography Star"

Imagine that you could spend the entire day with a "biography star." What would you see, hear, think, and talk about? Describe this special day. Here are a few ideas to get you started:

1. My Day with Margaret E. Knight. Imagine that you accompanied Margaret E. Knight when she went to court to defend her patent for the paper bag.
2. My Day with Alia Muhammad Baker. Imagine that you were there to help Alia Muhammad Baker save the books from her beloved library.
3. My Day with John Muir. Imagine that you accompanied John Muir when he guided Theodore Roosevelt through the Yosemite Valley in California.

Imagine that you could interview this "biography star." Prepare four or five interesting questions. Then, with a partner, write the interview. Write down one of your questions, and then write down an answer you think the "biography star" would give. Continue until you have used all of your questions. Practice reading the interview, and then present it to the class.

Activity 3: Overcoming Your Own Obstacles

In *Being Teddy Roosevelt*, Riley wants to learn to play the saxophone, but his mother can't afford to rent the instrument. Think about a problem you are facing or a problem you have learned about. This can be a personal problem (How can I save money for a bicycle?) or a larger social problem (How can we stop the process of global warming?) What would a biography star do about this problem? Write down some of your guesses.

What are your ideas? List some of them.

Place a star next to actions that you could do today, and an arrow next to ideas that could be undertaken in the future.

Write down the name of a classmate or adult who might be interested in the same problem, or help you with overcoming it.

Activity 1: Obstacles and Character Traits Chart

Title/Author	Obstacle	How It was Overcome	Character Traits that Proved Useful
<i>Marvelous Mattie</i> by Emily Arnold McCully	<i>An unscrupulous man tried to steal Margaret E. Knight's idea for making a paper bag with a flat bottom.</i>	<i>She went to court and got the patent rights to her invention. Then she opened her own business.</i>	<i>Margaret displayed persistence, creativity, and willingness to fight for her rights.</i>