

At some point in your child's early elementary education you're likely to see them tackle a biography unit at school. Curriculum (and potentially a costume) aside, picture book biographies are a means through which young readers can explore history. Here we'll look at some ways your child can benefit from reading biographies, as well as book suggestions to get you started.

Reading biographies **helps nurture children's empathy**. Picture book biographies offer a priceless glimpse into the lives of others. Honoring a real person's lived experience, they can raise your child's awareness about races, cultures, religions or philosophies that differ from your family's own. They can also offer your young reader a chance to see their own identity or heritage celebrated in the pages of a book! A biography is a powerful tool in helping your child appreciate the perspectives of others.

Incorporating nonfiction or "informational" texts into your child's reading selection **helps grow critical thinking skills**. A well-crafted biography for children will be thoroughly researched and compellingly written, giving young readers a sense of the time, place and circumstances in which the subject was acting. As you read a biography together ask your child questions inviting them to compare and contrast that subject or circumstances with other biographies or similarly situated fictional accounts and make predictions based on what you are reading.

When you finish the book, look to see if the author included a note or additional "back matter" that bolsters their research, which includes source notes, maps, or a bibliography. Help your child to think critically about why *that* author chose to tell *that* particular story, too. Was the author qualified, and through what lens is that author writing?

Picture book biographies **introduce your child to valuable role models**. By reading about both influential and lesser-known actors whose lives impacted our world, your child may be inspired to emulate the individual's qualities or contributions to society.

While there are scores of picture book options about successful athletes and politicians, try to find a biography celebrating the accomplishments of someone working in a field your child admires, such as an artist, scientist, musician or activist. Reading about a relatable life experience is as important to a child's healthy development as is reading about an impressive, perhaps unattainable accomplishment.

These eight options cover a range of experiences:

**“The Book Rescuer: How a Mensch from Massachusetts Saved Yiddish Literature for Generations to Come” by Sue Macy and Stacy Innerst (2019)**

A thirst for knowledge led Aaron Lanskey to track down a modest stack of Yiddish books that grew and grew to a collection of more than 1.5 million titles currently housed at the Yiddish Book Center in western Massachusetts. A modern biography that should appeal to bibliophiles, linguists, and general collectors.

**“Darwin’s Rival: Alfred Russel Wallace and the Search for Evolution” by Christiane Dorion and Harry Tennant (2020)**

While Wallace lacks the fame of his peer Charles Darwin, this humble naturalist reached the same conclusion about adaptations ensuring species’ survival—at the same time. An impressive explorer and specimen collector, Wallace’s travels and life’s work are captured in oversized illustrations that should inspire budding environmentalists.

**“Fauja Singh Keeps Going: The True Story of the Oldest Person to Run a Marathon” by Simrat Jeet Singh and Baljinder Kaur (2020)**

Fauja Singh was a late walker, taking his first steps at five years old. Although walking continued to be a challenge for years to come, Fauja never stopped working to grow stronger. At 81 years old, Fauja ran his first marathon and he continued for years to follow, even when he was 100! 108 years old at the book’s publication, Fauja encourages young readers to nurture their minds, bodies and souls to enjoy a long and healthy life, just like him.

**“How to Solve a Problem: The Rise (and Falls) of a Rock Climbing Champion” by Ashima Shiraishi and Yao Xiao (2020)**

Teen climbing sensation Ashima Shiraishi began scaling rocks in Central Park at age six. By the time she was eight, she was an expert level boulderer and setting international records at 14. Using visual mnemonics to plot her routes, Shiraishi climbs and falls, again and again, learning from each failure until she problem-solves her way to the top. This is a spirited picture book autobiography championing resilience and grit.

**“It Began with a Page: How Gyo Fujikawa Drew the Way” by Kyo Maclear and Julie Morstad (2019)**

A quiet student and skilled artist, Japanese American Gyo Fujikawa worked for Walt Disney Studios before her family’s internment during World War II. Gyo never stopped drawing, or fighting, and went on to create the first picture book that showed children of different races playing together. This is a biography that should appeal to artists, activists and historians.

**“Sharuko: El Arqueólogo Peruano Julio C. Tello”/Peruvian Archaeologist Julio C. Tello” by Monica Brown and Elisa Chavarri (2020)**

Exploring the foothills of the Peruvian Andes in his youth, Tello found ancient skulls that later piqued scientific curiosity. Tello dedicated his medical training to researching the Indigenous history of Peru, including those skulls, and his subsequent archeological discoveries informed and preserved Peruvian culture. This fully bilingual biography should appeal to young explorers, STEM enthusiasts, and to anyone looking to celebrate the cultural legacy of Indigenous or Peruvian heritage.

**“Shirley Chisholm is a Verb!” by Veronica Chambers and Rachelle Baker (2020)**

Families who may benefit from Rep. Chisholm’s work may not know she made revolutionary changes to preschool, Head Start, WIC and other government programs. The first—and for some time, the only—Black woman in Congress, Rep. Chisholm dedicated her life in service to the community. This biography highlights Rep. Chisholm’s tireless work through verbs and should appeal to grassroots activists and young change-makers.

**“Tallchief: America’s Prima Ballerina” by Maria Tallchief (2001)**

Raised on the Osage Reservation where girls were prohibited from dancing, Maria went on to become the country’s first prima ballerina and an international classical ballet sensation. A softly illustrated autobiography that should inspire artists to follow their passions reminds all that cultural beliefs can connect us to our work.

**“William Still and His Freedom Stories: The Father of the Underground Railroad” by Don Tate (2020)**

Most know the revolutionary work of Harriet “Moses” Tubman in leading enslaved individuals to freedom. This biography celebrates the tireless contributions of William Still in championing anti-slavery, documenting the stories of those who passed through Philadelphia on their journey north, and reuniting freedom-seekers with family—including his own brother. Carefully researched, with strong themes of pride in ancestry, this book details the contributions of historically underrepresented individuals.