Augusta Stevenson and the Bobbs-Merrill Childhood of Famous Americans Biographies

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> Many children who read well- written biographies feel as if the biographical subjects become personal friends. (*Through the Eyes of a Child...* by Donna E. Norton) [1]

When former Indianapolis school teacher Augusta Stevenson died in 1976, she had written over twenty-eight biographies for the *Childhood of Famous Americans Series*. She began writing the juvenile biographies for which she is best known at the age of sixty. She also wrote several juvenile dramas which were published by Houghton in their *Plays for Children and Young People* series.

The *Childhood of Famous Americans Series* began sixty years ago in 1932 with the publication of Miss Stevenson's biography of Abraham Lincoln. This biography of America's sixteenth president and hero of the American Civil War, was followed by a companion volume about Robert E. Lee, another great Civil War hero. Other books followed in the wake of the popularity of the first two titles. By 1952 the publisher had more than sixty titles in print. As of December 1960, according to the *New York Times* book section, twenty-eight titles in the series written by Augusta Stevenson had sold 1,750,000 copies. These figures represented the third largest hardcover circulation of juvenile books in the world. [2]

The original title of the series was *Boyhood of Famous Americans*, but the series title was broadened to *Childhood of Famous Americans* lest the publishers be thought of as misogynists. After the series name changed, *Louisa May Alcott* was published as the first famous biogra-

phy about a female. Although Miss Stevenson was not the author, she did write about other famous female patriots such as Clara Barton, Molly Pitcher and Nancy Hanks. The objective of the series was stated best by D. Laurance Chambers who became president of the Bobbs-Merrill Company in 1935. Chambers wrote:

> Each book was to introduce a famous American as a child, in a story about his childhood. It was not to be a biography, emphatically *not*, though the background must be authentic; the book must be true to the time and the place and to the known character of the subject. It should be an *introduction* to biography. Episodes chosen should illustrate characteristics in the child that, developed later in life, contributed to his adult fame...With all the element of invention essential to good storytelling, no one has ever said of any incident in any book in the series, "This could not have happened. This will mislead the child about the character." Invention, yes; distortion, never. The emphasis is all on narrative, with plenty of action and dialogue. Story, story, story. Each book is directed to readers who love stories above all else; whose interest is to be caught by stories only.[3]

The long quote above precisely outlines the format and style a reader should find when reading books in the series.

In her book, *Matters of Fact: Aspects of Non-Fiction for Children* (Brockhampton, 1972), Margery Fisher agrees with Chambers' basic interpretation of what a biography for children should be. In her opinion, very few books written for children are biographies as we normally use the term. The term "junior biography" is convenient but grammatically ambiguous. "Story biography" is a true description, but only of studies which are in narrative form, according to Fisher.[4] She also states that "biographies for children were once controlled by an establishment that exercised a powerful invisible influence."[5] Biographers writing for children often focused on the boyhood years of their characters, with titles like those published by Bobbs-Merrill before 1980 such as Elisabeth P. Myers' *Thomas Paine: Common Sense Boy* (1976), and her *John D. Rockefeller: Boy Financier* (1973), which revealed the accomplishments that the subjects would achieve.[6]

The invention which Chambers addressed and the focus on boyhood/girlhood are characteristics of the

Childhood of Famous American Series, hereafter referred to as (*COFAS*), and are used to clarify and invigorate a general idea. Children's biographies are often overtly didactic. The biography as a genre, sets out to instruct children about certain sets of facts and very often to convey a certain message as well. Fisher stated that the subject of a "biography is usually chosen as an example, in most cases, of a virtue".[7] The *COFAS* used euphemistic descriptors like "boy of the plains", "frontier boy", "boy scientist", "girl patriot" and the neuter name used for Annie Oakley, "Little Sure Shot". The series looked at famous Americans and placed them in historical periods from the childhood of colonial heroes, to the childhood of twentieth-century heroes.

Most authors of the standard or authorized biographies of famous Americans chosen for *COFAS* paid little attention to the first fifteen years of their subject's lives.[8] They sifted through scanty information, then tried to create stories with authentic, realistic settings. The editors made an effort to keep high and broad levels of interest and simplistic vocabulary. This was an exacting job which required that some manuscripts be rewritten three to four times. Patricia Jones, the juvenile editor for *COFAS* from 1938 to 1955, subjected the books to rigid revision. The editors selected as subjects, statesmen, soldiers, explorers and scientists, who they believed had and would continue to have real influence in the years ahead.

The usefulness of the books said Chambers "developed in ways not originally contemplated." School authorities began to term these offerings as low-vocabulary level, wide-interest range books. They proved to be remarkably helpful to so-called retarded readers even through their high school years. Practically all of the books have been reproduced in braille.[9] Several titles have been translated into foreign languages. By 1949, Stevenson's *Buffalo Bill: Boy of the Plains* had been published in Germany, purportedly to help in the denazification of Hitler youth. Turkish and an Iranian translations of her *George Carver: Boy Scientist* were in print by 1949. The biography about George Washington Carver made Bobbs-Merrill one of the early publishers of books about Black Americans.

COFAS are not high in the favor of some critics, but have started many an active youngster on the road to loving books. The series is reputed to "have launched, in 1932, the biography fever

with both children and publishers."[10] Zena Sutherland in *Children and Books* (HarperCollins, 1991), describes *COFAS* as high-interest, low-vocabulary books, rigidly patterned and quite often determinedly merry.[11] The series editors contracted with a group of writers of varying abilities, and the criticism of their works ranges from " thin and pedestrian," to of "major importance."

As stated at the beginning of this paper, Indiana author Augusta Stevenson was the major contributor to this series of biographies which brought her international fame, but through the years there have been questions about Miss Stevenson's adherence to essential facts. The fact that ten of her *COFAS*s were still in print in 1992, plus the fact that many libraries own them (according to OCLC), are unquestionable documentation of their appeal to young readers and perhaps to those who work with children. However, this popularity does not obscure the question — did she write marketable biographies while violating essential truths? And if so, is there any evidence, correspondence between editor and author for example, indicating tampering with reality? Is it fair to preclude that over simplification distorts reality?

Critics of biographies have noted that when comparisons between biographies for children, and biographies for adults and reference books were made, differences in facts often surfaced. A study by Ann W. Moore published in Donna Norton's *Through the Eyes of the Child...* (Merrill, 1991) showed that errors in contemporary children's biographies fall into one of three categories:

> 1) inaccuracies in numbers, dates, and names
> 2) incomplete, unclear or misleading statements caused by attempts at simplification
> 3) patently false, incorrect information [12]

Since it is almost impossible (particularly in Indiana) when talking about *COFAS*, to get a negative response about the series or a comment from some adult who read every one when they were young, I decided to study two titles by this most prolific author in the series. The *COFAS* manuscripts at Indiana University's Lilly Library allowed me a first-hand look at correspondence between the author and others involved in the publication of her books. The nations' current interest in multiculturalism indicated a need to look at biographies

and histories about minorities. I selected one title that has been in print for almost fifty years, and another, for thirty-seven years.

Miss Stevenson was one of the first juvenile authors to write biographies about Native Americans and African Americans. Adhering to historically correct terms used when the books were written, I will, as did resources used for this paper, use the terms Indians and Negroes. The two biographies are *George Carver: Boy Scientist* (1944) and *Tecumseh: Shawnee Boy* (1955).

George Carver: Boy Scientist

Augusta Stevenson's fictionalized biography of George Carver is a good example of how the series used "all the element of invention essential to good storytelling."[13] In this case the author kept George a "boy" for too many years. The omission of dates suspends the reader in space and time. At the beginning of the story Mrs. Carver, the wife of George's owner, spoke of the border warfare that broke out in 1860 and addressed a problem with the infamous night riders. The time of the unfolding events was 1861, yet Stevenson did not specifically mention the civil unrest in the United States or that Abraham Lincoln was president. Mentioning that slavery was abolished would have given more historical truth to the text. Readers are not able to gain a real sense of time. Stevenson informed her readers that George was ten years old when he left the Carver home to go to school. Then she said George was fourteen and a half, then fifteen, then a famous scientist, and finally an old man. There were no statements since the first comments by Mrs. Carver indicating in what years these occurred. George traveled from Missouri to Kansas, but young readers were given no geographical bearing.

In her dedication in this book, Stevenson acknowledged her indebtedness to Rackham Holt, author of *George Washington Carver : An American Biography* (Doubleday, 1943), who was a valuable source of information for her biography of George. Although she named Holt as a source she did not document Holt's date for George's birthday as 1860. The *Encyclopedia Americana* (1992) gives Carver's birthday as on or about July 10, 1861. Holt had checked census records for his date. Although birth certificates were not then issued to slaves, slave-owners usually documented the births.

Stevenson's lack of adherence to historical fact is also evident in her

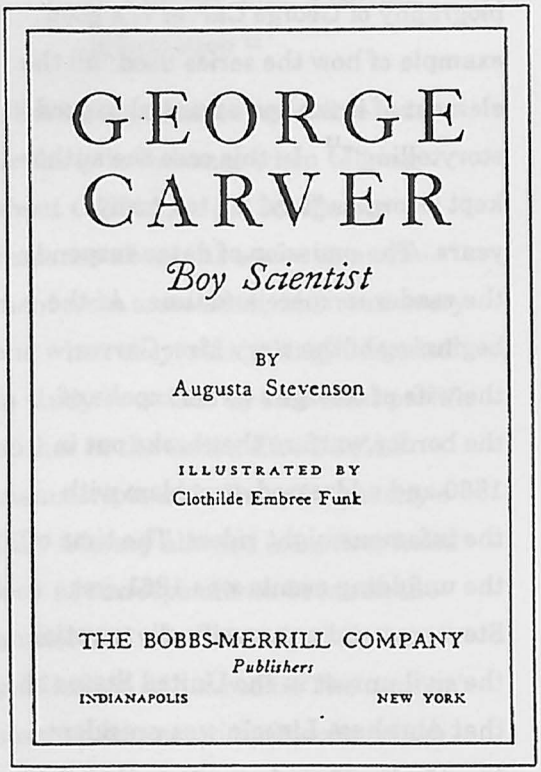
invention of new settings for events in George's life. She described a time when George was traveling around working his way through school and living with various people who gave him shelter and work. While in Fort Scott, Kansas, he witnessed the death of a Negro prisoner who was torn from the jail by an angry mob. Stevenson recounted this incident by having George become a victim. In her account, George was grabbed by a mob as he locked the shop one night for his employer, Mr. Simms, the town cooper. Simms, summoned by another man, arrived on the scene in time to save George.

Stevenson took three other actual events in George's life as told by Holt, and weaved them into a story about his high school graduation.

1. According to Stevenson, George sent money he had saved for a suit to wear to his graduation exercises to his brother Jim. Holt reported however, that Jim was dead by the time George finished high school.

2. Holt also described George's impersonation of a foolish female as having occurred sometime during high school days, but Stevenson wrote that the act was part of the graduation exercise.

3. The third event, according to Holt, illustrated the real reason that receiving the new suit was of such importance in George's life. In 1892 some of George's friends purchased a new gray suit, shoes and other trappings, plus a railroad ticket for him, so that he would be well-dressed when he presented his paintings at the exhibition of Iowa artists in Cedar Rapids during December 27 to 30, 1892. The judges chose four of the paintings to be shown at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago the following summer. Stevenson invented these other episodes to inform readers that George painted beautiful pictures.


GEORGE CARVER

Boy Scientist

BY
Augusta Stevenson

ILLUSTRATED BY
Clothilde Embree Funk

THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY
Publishers
INDIANAPOLIS NEW YORK

In spite of the differences in the contents of their two manuscripts, Holt wrote to Stevenson:

> I want to thank you most sincerely for the faithfulness with which you have depicted this most extraordinary boy and its promise of the great man he became.[14]

Three other individuals, Evelyn Sickels, Cleo Blackburn and Elsie Stokes read the unpublished manuscript and recommended its publication with some prescribed changes.

Evelyn R. Sickels who headed the Schools Division of the Indianapolis Public Library called the narrative a very interesting and informing account. She suggested some changes and omissions and a check of the published text indicates that Stevenson was amenable. Sickels wrote, "I believe I would omit the incident of 'A Terrible Night' or tone it down a little." That incident tells how George is mistakenly thought to be a thief. Sickels suggestion to omit the term "nigger" from seven pages is probably responsible for its deletion.[15]

Cleo Blackburn who was director of Flanner House, a large Negro community center in Indianapolis, criticized Stevenson's writing style and content. Some comments from his review are: "'he said' and 'she said' appear with monotonous regularity, and 'ha,ha' is rather overworked as an index of something funny." Along with the negative criticism Blackburn included some praise. He thought the:

> ..narrative a laudable and timely effort to focus the light of reason on that distorted area of human relations, interracial understanding. The style and presentation are simple, direct, and should appeal to the youth of all races. The manuscript is worth while and reveals knowledge of the subject and deep convictions on the race question without preaching a sermon.[16]

Elsie Stokes, a Nashville, Tennessee bookseller, was asked to read the Carver manuscript and comment from the southern point of view. Stokes' letter to Rosemary York, April 20, 1944, explains:

> ... that it would have been incorrect for George and his brother Jim to call the Carvers, "Aunt Sue" and "Uncle Mose". White children called negro men and women "uncle and aunt". It was a regular custom and a mark of respect. Stokes maintained that George and Jim would have addressed the Carvers as "Mis Sue" and "Marse Mose".[17]

Stokes expressed her enjoyment of the book. Stevenson changed her book to conform to the southern point of view and used "Mis Sue" and "Marse Mose." (Mr. Carver's name was Moses.) The dialogues, however, seldom had anyone addressing another person by name. (This is one of Blackburn's criticisms).

William L. Patterson, Director of the Abraham Lincoln School in Chicago, wrote:

> It is deeply gratifying to find from the pen of a white writer so warm and sympathetic a treatment of one of the black sons of America. I should like to see it in print and to have the opportunity to call it to the attention of my friends. As a Negro and an American, I want to thank you for this generous American act and the democratic spirit behind it which gave you to see the importance of such a subject as this. [18]

The book was well advertised in the Negro community. A memorandum in the manuscript files referred to a George Washington Carver Week with special displays in the three negro branches of the public library. It also stated that "the branch at School 87 has just been named the GWC branch." Miss Evelyn Sickels was to make arrangements for Miss Stevenson to speak at the school. [19]

Tecumseh: Shawnee Boy

Bobbs-Merrill published Stevenson's *Tecumseh: Shawnee Boy* in 1955. Juvenile editor Patricia Jones wrote a lengthy critique to Chambers about Stevenson's rough draft. She insisted that the author:

> ...needs to settle on one clear point to make about Tecumseh at least; to rework the inci- dents to show his character better to find out more about Indian life and times; to give us a better job of writing - both dialogue and narrative. [20]

In a memorandum dated May 23, 1955, Jones wrote:

> A lot of these incidents Augusta has used before in different settings. At least they have been tested and proved successful. I think that more study of the source material might have suggested some fresh and individual action - but I believe we have to take Augusta Stevenson as merchandise, not as historical research. [21]

Several lengthy memoranda indicate that Jones and Chambers were very concerned about the *Tecumseh*.. manuscript.

Anne E. Schraff wrote a biography, *Tecumseh: The Story of an American Indian* (Dillon, 1979) for a more advanced audience, (about fifth or

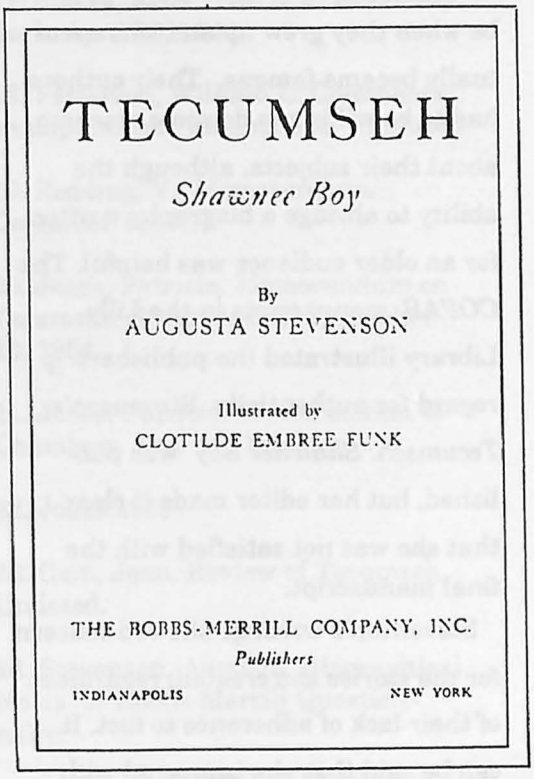
sixth grade), that received favorable reviews. Her biography was compared with the Stevenson text. Schraff recounted Tecumseh's life with limited use of dialogue, mostly undocumented Tecumseh speeches. A set of triplets which are important in the Stevenson manuscript are not mentioned in Schraff's biography. Jones accepted the triplets as "artistic license with a fair basis of historical legend, if not fact." [22]

Among the Stevenson manuscripts is a critique by Jean Cain. She referred to *Tecumseh: Shawnee Boy* as a series of disconnected and often pointless anecdotes rather than a book. She became much harsher with:

> The historical background also seems a big [bit] shaky. From any source that I can find Tecumseh was the twin brother of the Prophet, yet here he appears as the older brother of three ha-ha-ing triplets, one of whom was later the Prophet. [Stevenson's use of "ha,ha" in the Tecumseh manuscript received scathing criticism.] As a matter of fact I don't follow the reasoning of the whole manuscript and am inclined to wish Augusta had stayed in Virginia.[23]

The book nonetheless went to press with the ha-ha-ing triplets, Daniel Boone (maybe not *the* Daniel Boone) as a Shawnee prisoner, an unnamed drug-producing tree, and Lolo the Prophet, who was one of the triplets. Schraff gave the name Laulewasika to Tecumseh's younger brother, his mother's last child. The *Encyclopedia Americana* (1981), however, gives the name Laulewasika as the Prophet's name. No documents proposed that Stevenson's Lolo could be a derivative of Laulewasika, although the similarity to the first part of the name is suggestive. Patricia Jones thought that the Daniel Boone story was absurd. She states:

> This whole Daniel Boone story seems absurd to me. What a silly reason to have Daniel Boone captured! To help Indians learn to hunt and trap!!



TECUMSEH

Shawnee Boy

By
AUGUSTA STEVENSON

Illustrated by
CLOTILDE EMBREE FUNK

THE BOBBS-MERRILL COMPANY, INC.
Publishers
INDIANAPOLIS NEW YORK

Correspondence and the final text verify that Stevenson kept a tenacious hold on her manuscript despite pages of biting criticism from her editor.

Conclusion

Both of Stevenson's titles were highly successful *COFAS* publications. They were easy to read books about famous people and they satisfied young readers. No general statement can be made about the factual accuracy of the *COFAS* volumes that would be equally true for each title. The stories are formulaic. They are written for readers who like stories, especially stories about children who dreamed about what they wanted to be when they grew up and who eventually became famous. Their authors had to be willing to do some research about their subjects, although the ability to abridge a biography written for an older audience was helpful. The *COFAS* manuscripts in the Lilly Library illustrated the publishers regard for authenticity. Stevenson's *Tecumseh: Shawnee Boy* was published, but her editor made it clear that she was not satisfied with the final manuscript.

Stevenson's writings showed concern for the stories she created, regardless of their lack of adherence to fact. It can be said that she tampered with reality, moving people through space and time to create the excitement she wanted. Letters on file in the Bobbs-Merrill manuscripts at the Lilly Library further illustrate that Stevenson's creativeness gave the publisher some very trying moments. The titles discussed in this paper do show evidence that Stevenson's biographies had some errors in the three categories outlined by Ann W. Moore. Was the elimination of certain facts harmful to young readers? Did they need to understand the true climate of the United States during the early years of George Washington Carver's life? And what about Tecumseh? Is it critical that his family relationship's were inaccurate or that his encounters with Daniel Boone are questionable? It is not possible to check with the readers of these biographies to determine if their sense of history was lost by the misrepresentation of facts. One thing they did learn, which is perhaps all Miss Stevenson hoped to achieve, is that these were stories about people who became famous.

Stevenson wrote in a Bobbs-Merrill questionnaire:

> In my work as a teacher in the Indianapolis Public Schools I saw the necessity of

developing patriotism in children if we expected to meet the communistic plan of treating our American heroes with ridicule and contempt. And so.....I have endeavored to give the child ideals, and to create enthusiasm for these [people]. All of my twenty-three books for the *Childhood of Famous American Series* were written with one purpose...to develop in young children a feeling of patriotism or love of country, through childhood stories of great American patriots. [24]

Endnotes

1. Norton, Donna E. *Through the Eyes of a Child: An Introduction to Childrens's Literature*. New York: Merrill, 1991), 608

2. Commire, Anne. *Something About the Author: Facts and Pictures About Contemporary Authors and Illustrators of Books for Young People*. (Detroit, Mich: Gale Research, 1971), 2:235-6.

3. Chambers, D. Laurance. "The Genesis and Continuing Success of aWell-Known Juvenile Series", *Publishers Weekly*, (October 29, 1949) 1879.

4. Fisher, Margery. *Matters of Fact: Aspects of Non-Fiction for Children*, (Leicester, England: Brockhampton, 1972) 300.

5. Fisher, 300

6. Norton, Donna E., 609.

7. Fisher, Margery. "Life Course or Screaming Farce?" *Children's Literature in Education*, 22 (Autumn 1976): 108-115.

8. Chambers 1880

9. Chambers 1881

10. Sutherland, Zena and May Hill Arbuthnot. *Children and Books*, (New York, HarperCollins, 1991) 460

11. Sutherland 460.

12. Norton 611.

13. Chambers 1879

The location of the following sources is Bobbs-Merrill Mss., Manuscripts Department, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington

14. Holt, Rackham. Note to Augusta Stevenson. Undated.

15. Sickels, Evelyn R. Comments on unpublished manuscript. Undated.

16. Blackburn, Cleo. Comments on unpublished manuscript. Undated.

17. Stokes, Elsie. Letter to Rosemary York. April 20, 1944.

18. Patterson, William L. Comments on unpublished manuscript. Undated.

19. Redding, V. Memorandum. December 1944(?).

20. Jones, Patricia. Memorandum on *Tecumseh: Shawnee Boy*. December 10, 1954.

21. Jones, Patricia. Memorandum to Chambers. May 23, 1955.

22. Jones 1955

23. Cain, Jean. Review of Tecumseh. Undated.

24. Stevenson, Augusta. Biographical Notes for Bobbs-Merrill Questionnaire.