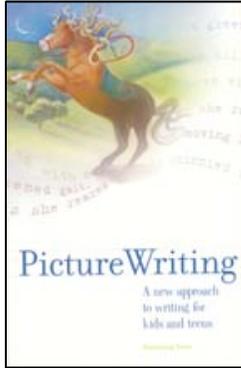


Picture Book Biographies

An Interview with author [Kathi Appelt](#)

With the arrival of the [Common Core State Standards](#) (CCSS), teachers and librarians are on the lookout for high-quality nonfiction. When I taught full-time, I loved using picture book biographies to introduce readers of all ages to interesting and inspiring people.



What's more, these well-written books make excellent mentor texts for teaching students close reading skills, the tools of research, and how to write informational pieces.

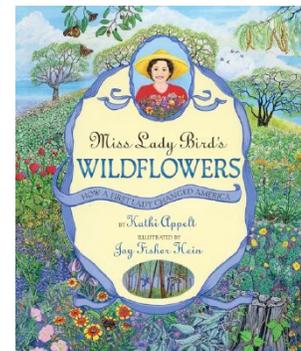
But it needs to be said that the biographies many of us grew up reading are nothing like those published today. If you're interested in writing a picture book biography for the current market, it's imperative to study and learn from those who've seen success.

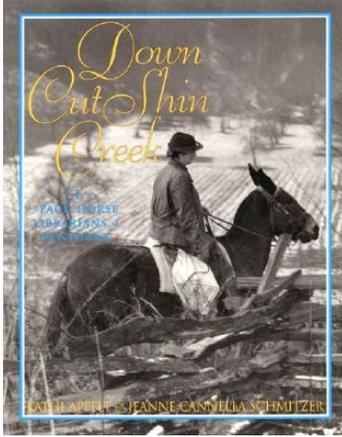
One of the more important decisions a picture book biographer will make is to the form and structure of the story. In a chapter titled "Seeing Nonfiction" from [Picture Writing](#), Anastasia Suen writes:

Some biographies focus on a single event in the life of a famous person. Others begin with a life-changing event in childhood and follow that child to his adult years, when he makes a difference in the world. Still others cover birth to death – in thirty-two illustrated pages – by focusing on how that person came to be famous. (53)

In the following excerpt of a 2008 interview, [Kathi Appelt](#) offers insight into the writing of [Miss Lady Bird's Wildflowers](#), illustrated by [Joy Fisher Hein](#). A gifted teacher and presenter, Kathi is on the faculty of [Vermont College of Fine Arts](#), where she helped launch the Picture Book Certificate Program.

***Dianne:** Miss Lady Bird's Wildflowers appears to land somewhere in-between Suen's "categories." You begin with Lady Bird's birth in 1912, and follow her life through childhood and her marriage to Lyndon Johnson, up to the establishment of the National Wildflower Research Center. How did you decide which frame your story would use? Which was harder? The research, or choosing which details to string together into the narrative?*





Kathi: I knew from the start that I wanted to focus on Lady Bird's environmentalism. A lot of people don't realize that Mrs. Johnson was second only to Eleanor Roosevelt in the legislation that she worked on behind the scenes. She was a very active first lady, always motivated by her love of the outdoors and nature. So, it made sense to try to show how that love began in her childhood and continued to serve as her "guide" throughout her life.

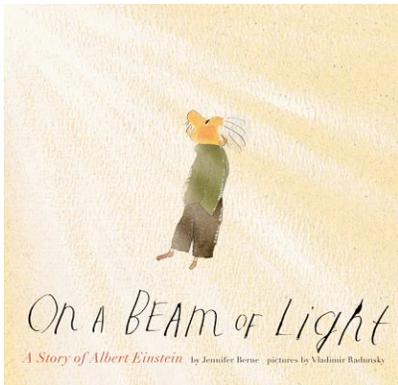
In the confines of a 32-page picture book, the author and illustrator are clearly limited. So for me, at least, the primary goal of a p.b. biography always goes beyond the frame. A good p.b. bio should introduce the child reader to the subject in such a way that they want to know more. The p.b. bio "represents" the subject, but rather than being inclusive, it can only provide a small representation, an introduction. I want my young readers to know about Lady Bird's environmentalism, but hopefully I've given them enough to want to know more about this remarkable woman.

I think the hardest part of writing any picture book bio is figuring out what to exclude. A person like Lady Bird who died in her 90's led a long and illustrious life. Lots of it was really interesting. But at the end of the day, I had to focus on those essential parts of her life that had to do with her environmentalism.



***Dianne:** Both you and Joy have talked before (see *Cynsations*) about writing *Miss Lady Bird's Wildflowers*. In that interview, you say that "the task of a picture book biography..." is, "... both a constraint and a wonder..." You've discussed this process with the students at Vermont College along with the idea of a "controlling belief." Can you define and elaborate?*

Kathi: The controlling belief is simply the belief or attitude that is so tightly ingrained in the character or person that it shades every action and every response that the character comes face to face with.



And for the purposes of a story, it's helpful to try to pin down ONE overriding controlling belief for that character.

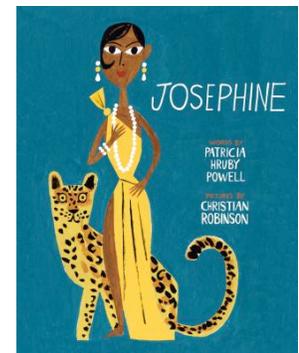
The best characters have an inner belief “and” a yearning/need, but the two are not necessarily the same. For example, a character may believe that he can't do anything right, no matter how hard he tries. But what if this same character gets lost in the jungle? He still has to find his way. But his belief will create all kinds of problems for him. This will be a character at war with his environment, but mostly at war with himself. At some point in the story, he may be forced to reckon with his tightly held belief.

Now, let's take a character who believes that he can do anything he puts his mind to. Put that same character in the jungle, and you'll have a different story. His approach will be different. That doesn't mean it will be easier. In fact, his belief might actually blind him to some very real dangers and make him reckless. He also may have to come face to face with his controlling belief. Maybe he can't do everything he thinks he can? In both instances, the inner belief will help you, the author, understand your character more deeply.

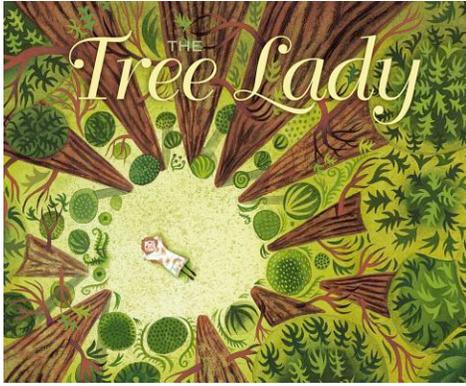
Dianne: In a January 2008 lecture at Vermont College, you said:

When writing about people – ourselves, others, or fictional characters – we need to know four essential things:

1. Their "occupation."
2. How well they perform that occupation, or how well they think they perform that occupation.
3. Their controlling belief or attitude.
4. Their goal.



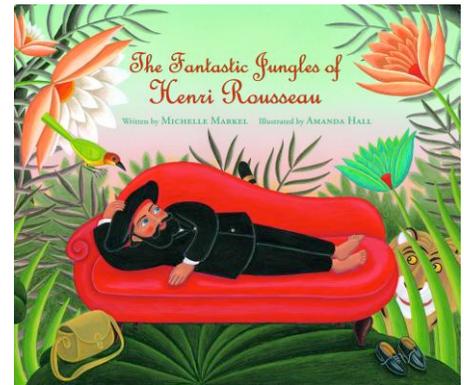
*Presumably, everyone has more than one job, and more than one controlling belief. How did you determine which of Johnson's controlling beliefs to focus on? Was settling on just *one* controlling belief difficult? In what ways did deciding help you clarify the through line of your story?*



Kathi: On the surface, it seems like it would be a relatively easy thing to settle on one controlling belief. Why not just state it? With *Lady Bird*, I knew from the start that I would write about her environmentalism. But it took me a while to figure out what her controlling belief was. Yes, I knew she loved nature. But it wasn't focused enough. I also knew that she was keen on helping others. Her motto is something like

“from those who have been given much, much is expected.” And she rather lived that in a million different ways. So in the early drafts, I held onto that motto, but it kept getting in the way of the story I wanted to tell. Finally, after lots of drafting, I realized that her true belief, *for the purposes of this story*, had to do with how she saw the role of nature as healing.

Early in my research I found her wonderful quote in her diary: “wildflowers are the stuff of my heart.” But it took awhile for me to figure out that in that line was the core of what Mrs. Johnson believed. She believed that flowers, the outdoors, nature, were restorative, that they all combined to make us better people. Once I settled on that, the story became much clearer to me.



Dianne: Each project, no doubt, teaches the writer something new about the writing process that carries over to the next manuscript.

Kathi: The major lesson of *Miss Lady Bird* was to learn to be willing to rewrite over and over and over. Joy and I stopped counting drafts when we hit 50. While *The Underneath* didn't require quite that many drafts, it did take several. That's not to say that I had never done multiple drafts before those books, but not quite at that level. And I would say that writing both of them taught me to keep digging, to find the heart.

To learn more about Kathi and her books, visit her website at www.kathiappelt.com.