

*What it takes to write a biography  
that appeals to adolescents—  
by one who has written sixteen of them.*

## A Biographer's Comment

By JEANETTE EATON



We probably all know adolescents who dislike or distrust adults. They suspect them of dark schemes of control or reform of youthful plans. But, met on a printed page, a grown-up may produce a very different effect. For one thing, dull, self-satisfied, preachy characters are not chosen by biographers. Oh, no! Only the gifted and heroic are selected. Such people always have adventures to capture the imagination. A young reader can admire them freely. Not one will walk off the page to scold, question or command. Moreover, if the writer is honest, the hero or heroine may show such endearing faults as temper or egotism to offset nobility and genius. A few of them even have humor.

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JEANETTE EATON *was born in Columbus, earned an A. B. at Vassar College and an M. A. at Ohio State University and held a number of jobs in a number of cities before she settled down to writing. She now lives on Hungry Hollow Road, Spring Valley, New York. Among her biographies are those of Washington, Franklin, Lee, Napoleon, Ghandi, Eleanor Roosevelt, Louis Armstrong and David Livingstone, which received in 1948 an Ohioana Honorable Mention. Her America's Own Mark Twain is the winner of the 1959 Ohioana Award for juvenile books.*

The six women I've chosen to write about vary greatly. Only one of them, an impish young lady, had much or any humor. They made up for the lack by being adventurous and lovable. Who could demand anything more of Jeanne d'Arc than the inspired intelligence and courage that made her glorious?

Of the ten men on my record sheet Ghandi was doubtless the most spiritually guided. But I have a strange affection for that daring, head-strong show-off, Buckey O'Neill of Arizona who never really grew up. It delighted me to find that the Father of Our Country was such a dandy and that he loved the theatre. I'm sorry he read practically nothing but books on agriculture. For there were exciting books shipped over from England at that time—books devoured by the youthful Franklin. Yet so great was Washington's presence and purpose, so charming were his manners and elegance, that the cultivated young Frenchmen who followed Lafayette to America didn't give a hoot about his ignorance of literature.

### The Person of Action

And there it is—the sure-fire subject of biographical interest to the young is the person of action. To see how a human being translates his faith in freedom or religion or his love of country into

deeds is ever a thrilling story. On the other hand, the life of a thinker, a dedicated artist or scientist appeals most strongly to maturity. For their adventures are of the mind and spirit. However, if boys and girls learn to enjoy biography, the men and women they become are likely to be fascinated by such a magnificent study as J. W. N. Sullivan's *Beethoven* or Gamaliel Bradford's sketches called *Bare Souls*.

Anyone who writes for youth nowadays has to compete with the effortless

entertainment offered by radio, television and the cinema. Anyone working in the field of biography has also to compete with writers of stories. So it is an enterprise rewarding in other ways than by either renown or financial return. But how rewarding it is! The research, the travel, the study of a period and the endeavour to penetrate the mystery of personality—all these factors make a vocation such as mine an ever enriching experience.

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