

Lives of the Scientists and U.S. Presidents

By Christine Schofelt
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Two collective biographies released this year aimed at children between the ages of 9 and 15, *Lives of the Scientists: Experiments, Explosions (and What the Neighbors Thought)* and *U.S. Presidents: Oval Office All Stars* miss the mark in many ways. Part of the *Lives Of ...* series, which has covered musicians, artists, athletes, writers and others so far, Kathleen Krull and Kathryn Hewitt's *Lives of the Scientists* (Harcourt Children's Books, 2013) offers brief biographies of twenty scientists. Their lives are sketched out in more or less chronological order, from 78 AD to the present.

While there are some unfamiliar names that will prompt, one hopes, further reading elsewhere, the book is largely a collection of trivia and loosely strung together minutiae offering little in the way of enlightenment for the reader. One comes away with scant reason to care about either the personalities involved or their scientific contributions.

Claims such as "When an apple fell on his [Newton] head, he responded with the law of universal gravitation" are made, leading the reader to think that the bonk on the head automatically shook the law of gravity into being. As to whether the apple story is myth or fact, according to Krull, "Newton always insisted it was true," and apparently that's good enough for our author. The matter is left unexplored—a common occurrence throughout the book.

As is the case with the other scientists discussed, the hygienic habits, moods and a very shallow treatment of Newton's social life are presented instead. Likewise, what rumors and first-hand accounts are offered lack any proper attribution—there are many instances of "people said."

The book is written in a conversational tone, but it is not comfortable. Describing scientists as being "jazzed," or being able to "snag" a job lends the air of trying too hard to communicate with the "young set." Not only will such terms fall out of fashion, but using

them gives the impression that the author doesn't think the material at hand could possibly be interesting to young people unless it is rendered in such a gimmicky fashion. This is condescending and a little insulting.

In the introduction, Krull declares the purpose of the book is to look at "How would their neighbors have viewed them?" Apparently, if one is to go by this book, the neighbors would have had only the most superficial and myopic view of things. This is a sad and inappropriate approach when dealing with any life, but particularly those of scientists whose very *raison d'être* is exploration and explanation.

The illustrations by Kathryn Hewitt do not lack charm, though the age group for which the book is intended will likely find them juvenile. In another setting they could serve well to engage the readers, and would make for fun trading cards.

With the addition of *U.S. Presidents: Oval Office All-Stars!* (Kingfisher, 2013), illustrator Simon Basher's series of books, which has covered sciences, math, grammar and a variety of other areas, has turned to the subject of history. *U.S. Presidents* follows the pattern set by the previous volumes, where concepts such as the elements, punctuation or mathematical processes are given a page to anthropomorphically explain themselves in the first person. While this works with physics, for example, where quarks and radioactivity can speak frankly, it falls flat when it comes to real human beings—especially if they are still around and are problematic (or worse) figures.

The effort of the author, Dan Green, to present a "balanced" or "apolitical" view of the presidents leads to some ludicrous results, such as his describing George W. Bush as "An easy-going and likeable Republican," and, in Bush's voice, noting that, "my response to Hurricane Katrina cost me fans."(!) The Patriot Act is described as simply something that enables terror to be better fought. Barack Obama

modestly declares himself “a supreme orator” whose “soaring speeches have melted the hearts of many.” He has ended the war in Iraq and “pushed through major health care reform”; apparently, though, “getting the economy back on track hasn’t been easy.” What a shame.

Flipping back through history, we see that Thomas Jefferson was, as he tells us, “one wise sucker,” but that “not everything I did made sense,” as he wrote that “all men are created equal” but also owned slaves.

In these pages, the combination of declared accomplishments and lack of historical perspective (which is exemplified by several presidents wondering “Who knew that actions in X would lead to Y?!”), leave the reader knowing no more about the people involved than that they existed.

Basher’s illustrations are simple in style, but occasionally perplexing; a propos of nothing, Andrew Johnson is pictured playing with what appear to be Legos and John Quincy Adams seems to have sprung a leak.

In all, the book comes off as a hastily cobbled together pageant with each president stepping forward and making a wooden speech that leaves no lasting impression. It’s nice to have the names and dates handily assembled, but this book does not even provide a good jumping off point for further reading.

When presenting a life story for children in only two to five paragraphs or pages, naturally much will be left out. It is, therefore, critical to consider carefully what is included. In neither of these books has this been done. A burgeoning interest in science or history will not find much to feed on in these works.

Worse, those who stumble across these books who have not been bitten by the science or history bugs will likely be turned off by the patronizing tones used. The Basher book’s insistence on having Jefferson and other long-gone presidents speak in forced slang, and the employment of likewise supposedly hip “lingo” in *Lives of the Scientists* are no substitute for writing intelligently and informatively. Young people deserve better material than these books provide.

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