

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 974

CS 212 724

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 TITLE Sifting through the Essential Fictions of Nonfiction: Contextualizing Ben Franklin.  
 PUB DATE Nov 90  
 NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (80th, Atlanta, GA, November 16-21, 1990).  
 PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
 DESCRIPTORS \*Audience Awareness; \*Biographies; \*Discourse Analysis; Literary Devices; \*Literary History; Literary Styles; Rhetorical Theory; Story Grammar; Writing for Publication; Writing Skills  
 IDENTIFIERS \*Franklin (Benjamin); \*Points of View (Writing)

ABSTRACT

One of the greatest myths or fictions of nonfiction is that it contains no fiction. Ben Franklin's flight from Boston to Philadelphia illustrates how changes occur in the retelling of the "facts" of a life. In his "Autobiography," Franklin writes that his friend, Collins, arranged for a ship's passage for Franklin by telling the ship's captain that Franklin "had got a naughty Girl with Child." During the nineteenth century biographers altered the story, making it more readable to the public at large. "Naughty Girl" became "girl of bad character"; pregnancy became "intrigue"; and responsibility for the story passes to Collins. By the end of the century, some writers chose to eliminate the passage altogether. For purposes of discussion, the 19th century may be divided into 4 periods. The early period (1800-1829) was affected primarily by the image Franklin himself created during his lifetime. Mid-century (1830-1859) finds additional scholarly work that give a more authentic picture of the man, but this is countered by additional fictional elements. An increasingly mythic image of Franklin as self-made man emerged in the Civil War and post-Civil War era (1860-1897). The late period (1880-1900) finds the image at its full mythic proportion. The survey of Franklin's image through nineteenth-century biography reflects how economic, intellectual, and social attitudes influence biographers to adapt a historical figure to the exigencies of their own era. Comparative analysis of a historical figure helps students understand the impact of point of view and audience on writing. (TD)

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Sifting Through the Essential Fictions of Nonfiction:  
Contextualizing Ben Franklin

The genre of nonfiction in general and biography and autobiography in particular is an area that has received renewed emphasis in recent years. This has come in part because of an increase in quality material written and available. One of the difficulties that readers encounter in the genre, however, is the lack of the discriminating skill necessary to sift through what we may call the necessary fictions of nonfiction. Perhaps one of the greatest myths or fictions of nonfiction is that it contains no fiction. As it relates to biographical writing, this misconception results in part from the mistaken notion that all a good biographer or historian need do in his or her narrative is relate the "facts" of a life, which in turn ensures reliability (Feldman 1). Once designated as autobiography, biography, or nonfiction, such writing receives a stamp of verity that many reader's accept and value unquestioningly.

In exploring some of the issues involved in this genre and in becoming more discriminating readers, we may look to the life story of a well known American, Benjamin Franklin. Chosen almost at random, I look at a particular incident from the colonial leader's life as retold and amended by various writers during the century following his death, and then propose some reasons for the types of changes which occur, looking at the larger context of how a mythic Franklin emerges from the "facts" of an autobiographical narrative the Founding Father himself preserved.

The incident I trace relates to Franklin's initial flight from Boston. The "facts" are these: Discontented in his situation, young Ben looks for alternatives to the apprenticeship with his brother James. Knowing that James has made certain no other printer in town will hire him, Franklin, with the aid of a close friend John Collins, devises a stratagem to leave Boston. He travels first to

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New York and then to Philadelphia where he secures work as a printer, an occupation that eventually brings about both monetary success and renown. In his *Autobiography* Franklin describes the flight as follows:

[Collins arranged] with the Captain of a New York Sloop for my Passage, under the Notion of my being a young Acquaintance of his that had got a naughty Girl with Child, whose Friends would compel me to marry her, and therefore I could not appear or come away publicly. (17)

It seems obvious today why such a passage may have troubled some biographers and readers, both the lie itself as well as the content of the lie. Mason Weems, an early biographer (1818) and itinerant preacher, begins a process of making these and other "facts" more readable to the public at large with a slightly less risque falsehood. According to Weems, "Collins engaged [Ben's] passage with the captain of a New York sloop, to whom he represented [his friend] as an amorous young blade, who wished to get away privately in consequence of an intrigue with a worthless hussy, whom her relations wanted to force upon him" (43). In effect Weems lessens the seriousness of the encounter (ironically, a fictitious one that never even took place), and further demeans the character of the young woman.

The endless variety of ways which biographers depict the incident proves enlightening and as well as entertaining. Orville L. Holley indicates in an 1848 biography with language similar to Weems that in leaving, Franklin resorted to his friend Collins, who, at Benjamin's request, engaged a passage for him in a New York sloop then just about to sail; alleging to the captain, as to the reason for his leaving Boston clandestinely, that he had an intrigue with a girl of bad character, whose parents would compel him to marry her, unless he could make his escape in this manner. (36)

The "naughty girl" has become only a "girl of bad character" and the suggestion of pregnancy in the original is lessened, as in Weems, to an "intrigue." While the idea of obtaining passage on the ship is clearly Franklin's, the text becomes more ambiguous as to whether the pretense of the bad girl was Franklin's or Collins' invention. In later accounts, the responsibility for the deception clearly begins to shift to Collins.

In describing Franklin's flight, William Russell in his *Extraordinary Men: Their Boyhood and Early Life* (1853) writes

ultimately Benjamin resolutely broke with his brother,--sold his books, and with the proceeds, contrived, aided by his friend Collins, *who* represented to the master of a trading sloop that he was fleeing the consequences of an imprudent amour, --to smuggle himself off to New York. (96)

Though a sense of Franklin's own account remains in Russell's retelling, the inference is that the fictitious story which aids Ben in boarding the ship is Collins' idea and comes at his instigation.

By 1861 in William Makepeace Thayer's popular adolescent biography *How Benjamin Franklin, The Printer Boy, Made His Mark*, Collins has clearly become the scapegoat, and the incident provides an opportunity for an extended authorial moral. As Ben discusses his departure with his friend, he expresses some concern.

"But he will want to know who I am, and will refuse to take me when he finds I am a runaway."

"I can manage that, if you will leave it to me," answered [Collins].

"I will pledge you that he will never know your name is Franklin."

"I agree, then, to commit myself to your care. See that you manage the affair well, for to New York I must go." (66)

Collins then arranges with the captain to receive Franklin secretly.

In this instance Thayer places all responsibility on Collins for the deception used to secure Franklin's passage. As Collins (referred to in the text by his given name John ) tries to convince the captain to take his friend to New York, he realizes a mounting suspicion in the seasoned sailor and "resolved to fabricate at story, in other words, to tell a base lie" (143).

"Well," said John, "if I must tell you the whole story, the case is this. He is a young fellow who has been flirting with a girl, who wants to marry him, and now her parents are determined that he shall marry her, and he is determined that he will not, and he proposes to remove secretly to New York. He could have come to see you himself, but it is not safe for him to appear out so publicly, and therefore he sent me to do the business. (143)

As the rigid morality of the Victorian era grew more pronounced in America, the invented story of the "naughty girl" grows milder until in most late century accounts biographers eliminate it altogether. Thayer's intent in retelling the story rests in demonstrating the character of Collins and showing how his lying foreshadows his ultimate downfall. Says Thayer,

A youth who can fabricate a falsehood so unblushingly as John [Collins] did this is a candidate for ruin. The reader will not be surprised to learn, before the whole story is told, that he became a miserable, wicked man. This single lie proved that he was destitute of moral principle, and would do almost anything to carry his project. (143)

According to Thayer, for some unaccountable reason the captain of the sloop believed Collins, and Benjamin found a way to leave Boston.

Paradoxically, Thayer sees the telling of one lie (Collins') as far worse than what we would normally think of as being the more serious offense committed by Franklin: breaking his indentures or running away. Thayer does concede that Ben behaved very "unwisely" and "wickedly" in whole

matter of leaving Boston, even though his brother abused him.

Although his brother was severely harsh in his treatment of him, it was not sufficient reason for his running away from home, and he was thoroughly convinced of this at an early day. Such an act is one of the most flagrant sins that a youth can commit, although circumstances may render it less guilty in some cases than in others. In the case of Benjamin, the unkind treatment which he received at the hand of his brother instigated his sin, though it by no means excused it. (145)

Thayer comments that after Franklin's flight from Boston, he seems on the "highway to ruin," for one can hardly think of an instance where a runaway "escapes the vortex of degradation" (146). Franklin's redemption comes in part by the difficulty of the situation he encounters after leaving home and family and through the redeeming virtues he exhibits once he gets to Philadelphia--those of industry, perseverance, and frugality.

By the end of the century, writers such as Brander Matthews (1894) choose to eliminate the troublesome passage altogether. Matthews tells us the departure from Boston was precipitated because

the elder brother treated the younger with increasing harshness, giving an aversion to arbitrary power which stuck to him through life. At length the boy could bear it no longer, and he left his brother's ship. James was able to prevent him from getting work elsewhere, so Benjamin slipped off on a sloop to New York. Failing of employment there, he went on to Philadelphia. (317)

Pursuing a line of reasoning used earlier, Matthews casts this and other troubling aspects of Franklin's story in a favorable light, not only in eliminating the "bad girl" reference, but in placing the flight from Boston in the context of an "either/or" scenario: either submitting to arbitrary power or seeking freedom. Obviously, a "true" American would value liberty and would

do all in his or her power to resist tyranny in any form. Thus, Franklin did the only thing he morally could have done given the situation: break his indentures and flee to Philadelphia.

Alterations of this nature were common in nineteenth-century retellings of Franklin's life and have continued into this century. While looking in more general terms at the trends in such amendments, we can see how the image of Franklin (typical of most any historical figure) reflects the personal and cultural biases of a given biographer and age. Using the nineteenth century as a representative period, at least four different emphases and corresponding "Franklins" are evident in narratives. For purposes of discussion and in identifying major movements and changes in the Franklin story, we may divide the nineteenth century into four segments: Early (1800-1829), Mid-Century (1830-1859), Civil War and Post-Civil War (1860-1879), and Late (1880-1900). As with any chronological division there remains a degree of overlap between periods in that history does not occur in exclusive 20 or 30 year segments. These divisions, however, do provide access to general trends occurring at certain times, helping to bring a focus upon societal changes which promoted certain aspects of the image and facilitated substantive changes in Franklin biographies.

The early period was affected primarily by the image Franklin himself created and promoted during his lifetime, an image his contemporaries reinforced. While much of the popular biographical material printed is simple anecdotes or short selections, fictionalization appears in this period through the efforts of the creative biographer, Mason Weems. Weems, intent on showing Franklin as a devout Christian, invents numerous incidents to demonstrate Franklin's religious faith despite his sometimes skeptic public stance. Increased interest in religion reinforces key aspects of the Franklin figure. By the end of this period, authors begin following the Weems tradition,

moralizing upon the life of Franklin, further selecting and emphasizing certain events in his life upon which to dogmatize. The net effect is to show Franklin as a pious Christian, reflecting more of the religious revivalism of the age and the personal agendas of biographers than the actual individual.

The mid-century marks a change in the number and kind of works to appear on Franklin. While excerpts of the *Autobiography* and short anecdotes from Franklin's life remain popular as fillers in periodicals and collected works, additional study by scholars and the availability of previously unpublished Franklin material help to round out the figure and give a more authentic picture of the man. This emphasis, however, is countered by the interjection of additional fictional elements into the Franklin narrative. As historical fiction and literary biographies increase, the intensely religious aspect of the image fuses with the hard-working, penny-pinching figure established earlier, reflecting important societal attitudes and resulting in what we may see as a sanitized Poor Richard. With greater frequency authors select a few traits of Franklin around which they related incidents of his life to prove a point or provide a moral.

In the era of the Civil War and the post-Civil War we see more secular societal, economic, and literary forces forging an increasingly mythic image of Franklin. With increased industrialization and urbanization in America and a rising middle class, Franklin becomes as it were a patron saint and exemplary model held to all who would rise from less than favorable circumstances to obtain a degree of independence and security in an increasingly complex society, prototypic of the self-made man. More concerned with showing an emulative ideal for young readers than providing an accurate depiction of history, biographers grow more fanciful, taking greater liberties in portraying the colonial leader's life. Of particular importance is the emphasis on Franklin's scientific achievements, evident in part by the more frequent

appearance of the title "doctor," an appellation used previously but reinforcing here the notion of upward social mobility to those willing to work hard.

The influence of Franklin further extends into the popular culture during this time as fictionalized accounts of his life appear with few vestiges of the real man and as the Franklinian archetype of the "poor boy who made good" becomes a commonly depicted character in novels and a growing theme in fiction. Most notably the Horatio Alger myth of "rags-to-riches" dramatically shows the impact and permutation of the Franklin story in popular thought as Franklin is appropriated by novelists and provides the prototype to characters such as Alger's Ragged Dick (a creative extrapolation of Poor Richard) and serves as the inspiration to other struggling protagonists in novels such as Alger's *Bound to Rise* (1873) and *Risen from the Ranks* (1874). The importance to biography of this appropriation of Franklin into popular literature is that the very process generates a reciprocal influence upon the historical figure wherein the early patriot comes to be seen in biographies as an Algerian hero. Additionally, during this period the nationalistic and patriotic impulse surrounding America's centennial celebration and continuing through the end of the century further sparks interest in Franklin and in the important figures involved in the formation of the United States. This nationalism further affixes the image of Franklin within the American tradition, reinforcing his status as an American hero, as is suggested in the quoted passage by Brander Matthews where most all actions are tied to the subject's citizenship and patriotism.

In the final two decades of the nineteenth century the image reaches its full mythic proportion, influencing even standard biographies. Most biographies depict a man whose very name is synonymous with hard work, perseverance, patriotism, success, and honesty, as the mythicizing process has completely abstracted important ideologies and beliefs from the historical

narrative. Franklin is often invoked to demonstrate or stress one of these given characteristics. His greatness is enlarged further as additional emphasis is given to his political work and his diplomatic assignments. As the critical studies begin looking at the multi-talented man, or the "many-sided" Franklin as he is referred to, the grandeur and importance of the figure presented in young adult reading material grows as well. By the close of the nineteenth century, Franklin becomes a figure of extraordinary size and influence, as is evident in a turn-of-the-century adolescent biography, Elbridge Brooks' *The True Story of Benjamin Franklin, The American Statesman* (1898), where an omnipotent Franklin is even given credit for the success of the Revolutionary War, having forged character in struggling Americans through the maxims of Poor Richard.

Brooks, while asserting in his preface that he wishes to avoid the inaccuracies of what he terms "historical fiction" in favor of telling the "true story" (as his title suggests), writes clearly one of the most fanciful and least reliable biographies. Imitating the style and tone of a fairy tale, Brooks places Franklin among many of the most remarkable men in history.

This is the story of Benjamin Franklin, most remarkable of Americans. How remarkable a man he was I shall try to tell you. What he did for his country, for you and for me, is a tale worth the telling and the hearing. For his story is fully as remarkable as was he himself. As wise as Solomon, as simple as Aesop, as witty as Mark Twain, as inventive as Edison, as gentle as a lamb, as bold as a lion, he tried his hand at everything and failed at nothing. Sixty of his eighty-five years of life were spent for the good of his countrymen. He built America; for what our republic is to-day is largely due to the prudence, the forethought, the statesmanship, the enterprise, the greatness, the ability, and the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin. His story

is one that the boys and girls of America should know by heart, and should all love to hear. And that is why I try to tell it.

Listen to his story. (11-12)

Resorting to hyperbole, Brooks feels no greater American has lived. Transcending and surpassing both the ancients (Solomon and Aesop) and the contemporary (Twain and Edison) in greatness, Franklin not only *built* America but, in many ways, *is* America. He not only typifies the United States but embodies the values it represents. Like a catechism internalized and committed to memory, so Franklin's life should be continually remembered and repeated. As a figure of heroic stature, Franklin overcomes all obstacles against all odds in fulfilling his appointed task. No man or woman, according to Brooks, is more American than Benjamin Franklin, an attitude continuing in most subsequent biographies.

With little difficulty we could trace the treatment of Franklin through the twentieth century, discovering similar personal and cultural biases. But this survey of Franklin's image through nineteenth-century biography reflects how economic, intellectual, and social attitudes influence biographers to adapt an historical figure like Franklin to the exigencies of their own era, reflecting their personal frames of references and biases in the telling of the "truth."

Clearly, many of the examples and trends identified suggest the imaginative and subjective nature of biographical and historical writing. Using portrait painting as a metaphor for biographical writing (an analogy often used), we can see how a biographical depiction, like a portrait, can essentially be reliable while reflecting the unique and often peculiar artistic flourish of the painter, showing a very particular perspective. In biographies, fictional techniques are often used in making subject matter come alive in the mind of the reader. This type of comparative analysis suggests that there is really no such thing as a purely "objective" biographical or autobiographical account, for

the process of writing requires the author to select, edit, and narrate from a certain vantage point, some perspective on events which must necessarily be subject to bias, both personal and cultural (Feldman 6-7).

Such research has led me to make writing assignments to students designed to help them discover the subjectivity involved in writing *to* a particular audience *from* any particular point of view. Using material from their own lives, students discover how the telling of any good story, however factual, requires fictional techniques. For instance, I ask students to write an account of their best date or of an exciting yet unapproved (even illegal) experience for three different audiences: their best friend, their mother, and a religious or other adult leader. Or I could ask them to take a week's or month's worth of personal or family cash register receipts and imagine some future age is attempting to write their life story with only the factual information on receipts, from which they must puzzle out and construct a life. Moreover, in the same vein as my own comparative analysis of Franklin, I encourage students to discern how an historical event or figure differs from the retelling of two or more authors. For example, how does the depiction of Benedict Arnold differ in a biography authored by an American and that of a Briton? Or how does a biographer's perception of Arnold differ in a biography written during World War I or II versus the post-Vietnam era?

In 1728 as a young man, Benjamin wrote an epitaph which suggests his own awareness of the subjectivity of both autobiographical and biographical writing. While never engraved upon his headstone, it exists as one of his best known short writings. The epitaph closes with Franklin affirming his belief that he would

... appear once more,

In a new & *more perfect* Edition,

Corrected and amended

By the Author. ( *Writings* 91 )

While "the Author" has most often thought to be God, certainly biographers and critics of Franklin's life have seen fit to "correct and amend" this famous American's image for "new and more perfect" editions. As we look to Franklin or any other subject of biography, undoubtedly, the correcting and amending will continue. A comparative analysis like the one I propose with Franklin and Arnold, together with the writing activities such as those suggested help students better understand not only the impact of point of view and audience on writing but, where the story of a life (even their own) is concerned, how much fiction is involved in both the living and the telling.

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