



Tales Out of School

Spring 2011

EMPORIA STATE UNIVERSITY™

Biography Writing

This issue of *Tales Out of School* features the work of ESU graduate student, Anna George. Anna is a student of Ethnic and Gender Studies whose work is primarily focused on women in the William Allen White family. We are taking this opportunity to focus in on teaching biography writing. In addition to Anna's piece about W. L. White's adoption of Barbara White Walker, the issue features books, online resources, and a few lesson plan ideas to get your students writing.

Lighter and Brighter

by Anna George



As another day in February 1940 entered into the twilight hours, an American man and British child settled into a single cabin aboard the *USS Excalibur*. The large passenger ship was to set sail from Lisbon, Portugal where the two had arrived after a bumpy flight on an eight passenger plane with the child on the man's lap. The two had escaped the terrors of World War II

and the impact of the Blitz upon London. After wartime delays and cancellations the cabin was obtained at the last minute, as was a passport for the child. The child was a war orphan from London and international travel protocols considered her "a British belligerent."² This restriction on the child had the two arriving aboard ship just before the gangplank went up. The newly minted parent and child, who were practically strangers to each other, would discover a bond through a struggle to get to the American shore. This bond would help to secure the professional legacy of the man.

In 1940, William Lindsay White (Bill) was a well known author, editor, journalist, and war correspondent. Bill was born in 1900 in the small town of Emporia, Kansas that would become famous through his father, William Allen White, a newspaperman described as the "Sage of Emporia." Young Bill, as he was called during his father's lifetime,³ was raised to be a newspaper editor⁴ and run *The Emporia Gazette*. But Bill knew that being the son of William Allen White brought both advantages and disadvantages. Bill knew that not only his parents looked to him to set an example but the community at large did as well. An example of this was a time that Bill pulled a prank that any normal boy would have been punished for and that would be the end of it but not for Bill. He had to make a public apology for his actions.⁵ His father had set the standard he was to follow but Bill wanted to create his own name and develop his own legacy separate from that of his father's. Bill stood at a slender 5 feet 10 inches tall, with a round face topped by a receding hairline; he appeared homely at first sight, but his sense of humor, laconic wit, and ready smile showed him as the handsome man he was.⁶

Bill knew that there was an expectation for him to carry on the legacy of his father. However between the years 1931 and 1940, Bill received only some success intermixed with many failures as he worked as a freelance writer. As Bill later recalled in a speech, "The period was I think more painful for my father than it was for me, for no man wants his son to fail, and when

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the son of the Sage of Emporia is floundering around, this can hardly be kept a secret within the trade.”⁷ Then, in 1939, he took on the role of war correspondent and radio broadcaster. This position took him to his highest level of success⁸. Bill would go on to write a popular syndicated column, numerous journal articles, and 14 books. Three of his books became movies, and he became editor of the *Emporia Gazette* after his father’s death in 1944. He had come into his own as a writer during the World War II years after having been known for so long as the son of William Allen White.

Now this famous son was sharing his shipboard cabin with his newly adopted child. Bill had been heading to his correspondent job in war-torn London in 1940 when Kathrine, his wife, made one special request: “Darling, when you get to London, why not look into the chances of adopting some children?”⁹ This was a reasonable request considering their difficulties in conceiving a child. In 1933, Kathrine had had an ectopic pregnancy and subsequent surgery that ended with a severe infection.¹⁰ Bill had prostate surgery in 1934.¹¹ Bill and Kathrine had considered adoption many times over the years but had put it off because they had an unsettled home life



and an uncertain financial future.¹² Before he left for London, Bill penned a note to himself so as not to forget Kathrine’s request while in London. It stated simply “uplook kids.”¹³

Bill and Kathrine Klinkenberg had been friends for a few years before they began a serious romance in the spring of 1929.¹⁴ She was a tall, blonde,

and stately woman who “carried herself like a Powers Model.”¹⁵ Her friend, writer Harry Ferguson, would later describe her as a “Viking who was five feet seven inches tall and one of the most stunning females I have ever had the pleasure of gazing upon.”¹⁶ Bill was not only smitten with Kathrine’s looks, the

two had much in common right from the start. Kathrine was a small town Kansas girl who had escaped what she had viewed as the confines of that life into the exciting cosmopolitan world presented by a city.

Kathrine was born in Cawker City, Kansas but was raised in nearby Ottawa until she attended college at the University of Kansas and then at the University of Wisconsin.¹⁷ Belonging to a patriarchal family, Kathrine had to give up her childhood dream of becoming a physician. As a woman, her role was to work in the family pharmacy while her brother became the doctor she longed to be.¹⁸ When she arrived in New York City, her career choice took her into the world of publishing. She worked as a fact checker and copy editor for *Time* and *Life* magazines¹⁹ and she became part of a fast paced, adventurous lifestyle very different than the world of a slow paced small town. She even developed, as a former employee would write years later, a unique New York inflected voice.²⁰

Bill knew well the transition from small town to big city. Bill had traveled extensively, locally and abroad, with his parents and on his own. His responsibilities to the *Gazette* and his parents kept him living at home though. He had often traveled to New York City as this was a major port for Americans traveling to Europe. In 1929, Bill had saved enough to travel to Europe by working at the *Emporia Gazette*. Bill planned to write a travel guide for the common person traveling on a budget and his father agreed to publish it in the *Emporia Gazette*. He left for New York to catch his passage to Europe. It was during a few days layover in New York City that Bill met Kathrine through her work at *The New York Times* and was immediately smitten.²¹

Their romance began to blossom, but Bill’s parents relayed concerns from home. As Bill’s biographer later noted “The elder Whites were used to benign interference both in the moral life of the town and in that of their son.”²² They wanted their son to choose a “safe” Emporia girl. This would be a girl who would be a fine fit with the town to which Bill was expected to return. His father encouraged him to rethink his choice in a letter, “Lord, Bill, when a man marries, he makes about the only decision he makes in his whole life.”²³ But he made his own choice in 1931. Bill decided to move out to New York City to pursue a career as a freelance journalist with an ulterior motive in mind; New York was where Kathrine resided and now so did Bill.²⁴

Despite his parents’ disapproval, Bill married Kathrine in 1931 at a fashionable Manhattan Episcopal church. Their marriage would surpass any concerns that had been laid upon it by lasting through the trials and tribulations that 42 years together would bring.²⁵ The trials included the inability to have children. The couple knew this affected not only them as a

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couple but also affected their ability to pass on the legacy they had been charged with perpetuating in their roles as the son and daughter-in-law of William Allen White. Now their goal of having a child was about to be fulfilled.

Before their desire for a child could be realized they had to contend with the war, which had taken its toll on London. At his hotel Bill became used to the sounds of bombs landing, the sirens signaling to take cover: he had to use a bathroom to take cover because it had no windows.²⁶ This was a daily part of living through the Blitz.

The Blitz began on September 7th 1940 and the statistics were grim, “For the next consecutive 57 days, London was bombed either during the day or night. Fires consumed many portions of the city. Residents sought shelter wherever they could find it - many fleeing to the Underground stations that sheltered as many as 177,000 people during the night. In the worst single incident, 450 were killed when a bomb destroyed a school being used as an air raid shelter. Londoners and the world were introduced to a new weapon of terror and destruction in the arsenal of twentieth century warfare. The Blitz ended on May 11, 1941.”²⁷ although sporadic bomb raids would continue throughout the rest of the war. Bill was in the middle of these terrible days, days which took his search for a child, as Bill would later describe, into a “curious miniature world of war-waifs and bomb orphans.”²⁸

A wartime adoption meant that Bill needed to be accepted by the London society that oversaw adoption at that time. The years 1918 through 1945 issued many changes in the adoption procedures in England. Before World War I, adoption was an informal procedure which ensured no rights for the adoptive parents. The war increased the demand to adopt children and the procedures to adopt changed to fit that demand. In 1939, Parliament passed the Adoption of Children (Regulation) Act.²⁹ Following the local laws and procedures, Bill was elated when he and Kathrine were approved for two children, a boy and a girl. Bill wrote his parents at the time “I am trying hard to locate some good kids for adoption—I’ve got it mostly lined out now but selecting the kids and then getting them home.(sic)”³⁰ Then the thought of children had Bill becoming panicky.

Before he met any children, he asked himself, “What did I know about children? How could I tell a dull child from a potentially bright one who could take a good education?”³¹ The picture of what an adopted child would look like also brought a sense of fear. Bill later wrote that his picture of an adoptable child was a kid “somewhat pasty and lumpy of feature, with a cowlick running the wrong way, clothes which don’t fit and a loose stare.”³² He realized that he would need help in choosing a child and remembered his friend, Anna Freud,³³ who lived and

worked nearby. She agreed via telephone to examine and test both of the children after he met them.³⁴

Anna Freud had fled to Britain, due to the German persecution of the Jews, after the Germans had interrogated her Jewish family in Vienna in 1938. The Freuds had been allowed to leave once a ransom had been paid. It was at this time that Anna, who had studied child psychology for years, began developing homes in Britain for war orphans. These homes were an effort not only to help the children but to study the effects of the war upon children. Anna Freud was described as ruling her clinic, the Hampstead Child Therapy Clinic, with a firm but tactful hand.³⁵ Bill described her as a slight woman with dark eyes; others remembered her for her dancing eyes and caring ways with children.

The next step was to be introduced to the children at the adoption agency. Bill was introduced to the four-year-old boy first. The boy was a handsome young child with reddish brown hair who appeared to be polite and proper but very quiet. Bill was told that the report on the little girl that he was waiting for was not very good: she refused to eat, and was unhappy at her foster home,³⁶ but what he found, the *Emporia Gazette* would report years later, “was an engaging, though completely dazed and terrified, little 3-year-old with neither home nor parents.”³⁷ She was a pretty little girl with blonde hair and black eyes. These were the two children he would take with him to Hampstead and to Anna Freud. He would place the two children with Freud for intelligence and personality testing. Freud would provide a place for them to stay while he found transportation out of England.³⁸

The children were to spend several days under the supervision of the very capable and loving staff at Anna Freud’s Rest Center for Children. Their stay took place during the time that Anna Freud was studying the effects of war upon children. This research was later published in a book co-authored by Dorothy T. Burlingham called War and Children. This study revolutionized the scholarship on children’s reactions to war and altered many preconceptions. The authors wrote; “Love for the parents is so great that it is a far greater shock for a child to be suddenly separated from its mother than to have a house collapse on top of it.” Guns, bombs, and sirens created less horror and response for a child than originally imagined.³⁹ Bill’s prospective adoptees were to be tested for the emotional toll the loss of their parents had created for them. The little girl appeared to suffer emotionally more than the little boy.

The testing included evaluations of both emotional stability and intelligence. Bill remarked that he felt like a traitor, getting to know both children before he had decided to adopt both of

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them. Above all, he was awaiting the outcome of the tests.⁴⁰ The boy was always relaxed, happy, and eager to please but the girl was not. She was vocal, at times sullen, but could be very expressive. It turned out that this should not have been a concern, for the little girl's reactions were a sign of intelligence. Perhaps the boy's lack of reaction was representative of a lack of intelligence.

Both children were given the same tests, which involved drawing triangles and drawing in what was missing in a scene. The little girl excelled at the tasks while the little boy failed.⁴¹ Bill recognized that in spite of the tests the children loved each other and he decided he wanted to adopt them both. He would later write that brains were a dime a dozen but "the freely-given, unmasking love like the little boy's you only find once in a lifetime." He decided to hell with the tests. But before he could proceed, he needed to tell Kathrine. She responded with a cable, "Disregard tests children sound lovely bring back a whole litter love Kathrine.(sic)"⁴² It was decided on the home front, but now Bill had to figure out how to get both children home to America.

Bill found this to be a nearly impossible task. His biographer would later write that going through Portugal was the only



passageway out of Europe in 1940 and Bill had to compete with the nearly 10,000 other refugees trying to leave the continent as well."⁴³ Bill had one plane reservation and three people to get home but the success of the trip would end here as disappointment would win in this situation. There were

no seats available for even one extra child. The only airline that was making flights to Portugal was Imperial Airways and they had no space on any flight. The plane was an eight passenger craft that made only twice weekly flights. The takeoff for such a plane was determined by weight, with every bag and person carefully weighed before any attempt to fly would be made.⁴⁴ A passenger's baggage alone could weigh no more than 40 pounds.

Bill came up with an idea on how to get home as he thought about the plane and the weight restrictions. He would later write that the idea had come from a health check the night before where the girl weighed exactly 32 pounds and

the boy 37.⁴⁵ He contacted his connection at the Ministry of Information all the while wondering if his idea was too crazy to succeed. But his contact came through. The Air Ministry agreed that Bill could carry a child instead of luggage onto the plane. Then Bill thought of the children and thanked God that he did not have to choose between them. He would later write "at least the tests did that for him." The little girl was lighter and brighter and would be the one to go home to America.⁴⁶

The father and daughter headed to the airport for their flight to Lisbon while the little boy, the White family found out years later, was gently returned to his foster mother in London and eventually adopted. The little girl sat on Bill's lap for the entire flight.

When they landed in Lisbon it seemed disaster had struck again, as Bill found that his Pan Am flight reservations had been cancelled and moved two weeks ahead. He scrambled through his connections and managed to secure a cabin aboard the American Export



Lines passenger ship the *USS Excalibur* for February 1, 1941. The next task was the difficult one of obtaining his daughter's passport, which he achieved at the last moment. The ship docked 10 days later on the Jersey shore and Bill and his daughter walked into the arms of the waiting Kathrine.

The little British girl was named Barbara White. She had secured a loving home along with an incredible legacy. She would later write of her childhood that, "We lived in New York City when I was growing up but both my parents had their roots well planted in small-town mid-western values."⁴⁷ In New York, she was surrounded by culture and the frenetic pace of a city. But her family's life centered around her father's ability to write and the editorial needs of the *Emporia Gazette*. Barbara later described her parents with loving detail

"My father, for most of his life, suffered from deep depressions and manic highs, and depended on my mother to provide the balance of normalcy for both work and family. My mother did an amazing job of keeping life on a fairly even keel, in spite of my father's changing moods, frequent forays into risky adventures, and uneven work performances.

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When he was well, my father was a warm, loving man with a keen sense of humor, but his devastating mood swings took their toll on my mother, who sometimes seemed hard and demanding. Depression was a family thing, and felled several generations of Whites. Both my grandfather and my grandmother



took long rest cures in New Mexico and California, even before they lost their daughter in 1921. Mental illness was never talked about in those days, and even in my father's lifetime my mother carefully covered up his illness, and my father referred to his sick old mud turtle days."⁴⁸

After Bill's death in 1973, Kathrine White ran the *Emporia Gazette* and Barbara took over after the death of her mother in 1988. When she was asked about being handed a legacy of such enormity as that of the Whites, Barbara replied "What I learned about legacy was something my father never quite learned. William Allen White was a wonderful, talented man who was, nevertheless, neither saint nor devil, but a simple human being. In spite of his many reverent followers, he, too, was just someone's son, husband, and father,"⁴⁹ just as she knew her father was.

(Endnotes)

- 1 The condition that is placed upon a person if their country is engaged in a war whether or not their country is the aggressor. This status is given by neutral and opposing countries. (Britannica Online Encyclopedia 2010)
 - 2 Jernigan. Jernigan, E. Jay. William Lindsay White 1900-1973 In the Shadow of his Father. Norman, Ok: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997. 135
 - 3 Smith, Karen Manners. "Father, Son, and Country on the Eve of War." *Kansas History: A Journal of the Central Plains* 28, 2005: 31-43. 32
 - 4 "New Journey for Margaret." *Emporia Gazette*. Emporia, Kansas: Emporia Gazette, 1957. "William Lindsay White." *Kansas State Historical Society*. 2010.
 - 5 (Jernigan, 19)
 - 6 (Jernigan, 6)
 - 7 (Jernigan, 7)
 - 8 (Smith 2005, 32)
 - 9 White, William L. Journey for Margaret. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941. 4
 - 10 (Jernigan 1997, 81)
 - 11 (Jernigan 1997, 92)
 - 12 (Jernigan 1997, 134)
 - 13 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 4)
 - 14 (Jernigan 1997, 60)
 - 15 (Amirault 1988) Amirault, Mary Jo Cowan. "Remembering Katherine White." *Emporia Gazette*. Emporia, Kansas: Emporia Gazette, September 2, 1988. John Robert Powers started the first modeling agency in 1923. The school trained many famous people; Jackie Kennedy and Princess Grace of Monaco.
 - 16 (Jernigan 1997, 68)
 - 17 KSHS. "Genealogy." *Real People. Real Stories*. Topeka, KS: Kansas State Historical Society, 2008.
 - 18 (Jernigan 1997, 68)
 - 19 (Jernigan 1997, 60)
 - 20 (Amirault 1988)
 - 21 (Jernigan 1997, 134)
 - 22 (Jernigan 1997, 73)
 - 23 (Jernigan 1997, 61)
 - 24 (Jernigan 1997, 68)
 - 25 (Jernigan 1997, 68)
 - 26 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 57)
 - 27 Blitz, The London. <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com>. 2001. <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/blitz.htm> (accessed April 7, 2010).
 - 28 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 37)
 - 29 Grey, Daniel. *www.history.ac*. 2009. www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/806 (accessed March 15, 2010).
 - 30 (Jernigan 1997, 134)
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- 31 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 37)
- 32 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 39)
- 33 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 39)
- 34 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 38)
- 36 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 39)
- 37 (White, New Journey for Margaret 1957)
- 38 (Jernigan 1997, 135)
- 39 Reuters. *On this Day*. 2009. www.nytimes.com/learning/general/onthisday/bday/1203.html (accessed March 27, 2010).
- 40 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 118)
- 41 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 199)
- 42 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 201)
- 43 (Jernigan 1997, 134)
- 44 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 230)
- 45 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 230)
- 46 (White, Journey for Margaret 1941, 231)
- 47 Walker, Barbara White. *The Emporia Gazette Family History*. 2000. www.emporia.com/waw/thirdgeneration.htn (accessed march 27, 2010).
- 48 (Walker 2000)
- 49 (Walker 2000)

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- Amirault, Mary Jo Cowan. "Remembering Katherine White." *Emporia Gazette*. Emporia, Kansas: Emporia Gazette, September 2, 1988.
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Lesson Plans

Alphabet Biography

<http://www.webenglishteacher.com/biography.html>

Students brainstorm 78 possible topics (3 for each letter of the alphabet) that could be developed into 2 paragraph informal "essays." Writing takes place over several weeks - prevents boredom and allows students time to edit and rethink ideas. When rough copies have been edited by students or teacher (only if it's a personal subject they don't want to share) then final copies are made. When all 26 pages are complete, books are bound - either by student choice of binding materials, or by teacher-provided materials. I gather card stock and have students decorate/illustrate. Then we three hole punch, put in some brass prongs, and it's done!

A Potpourri of Ideas

<http://www.42explore2.com/biographies.htm>

This site is filled with numerous ideas for lesson plans including prompts like "who would you like to see on a Wheaties box and why?" to "find a career through writing biography."

Make A Class Directory

http://www.eduref.org/cgi-bin/printlessons.cgi/Virtual/Lessons/Language_Arts/Writing/WCP0008.html

A class directory is a booklet of stories written by the students in a given class about other students in the class. By doing this project, students become better acquainted and bond as a class. When done at the beginning of the year it not only "breaks the ice," it serves as a diagnostic tool for the teacher. I can quickly assess where each student is in social skills, language, reading, writing, spelling, etc. Writing skills, such as asking for complete information, following up on questions, organizing information on a variety of topics, and making generalizations based on specific bits of information, are also developed.

Books & Online Resources for Young Biographers

History Makers: A Questioning Approach to Reading and Writing Biographies

By Myra Zarnowski

Published by Heinemann, 2003

Zarnowski's practical text focuses on a questioning approach to teaching history. Rather than merely memorizing facts, students engage in historical sense making using the biography as an entryway into the larger issues of history. Each chapter deals with a new way of questioning and dialoguing with biographies, including such strategies as:

- what if...? - a means of exploring what might have happened in the past, but didn't
- powerful pairs, triplets, and quads - a careful examination of competing or complementary biographies about the same person
- visible authors - a look at how authors put themselves into their biographies by giving us their "take" on the facts
- sidebars, captions, timelines, and authors' notes - appealing ways of providing information to enhance the text
- simple questions (without simple answers) - What's the difference? What do you think? What else? - *straightforward but challenging questions that grab students' attention and launch in-depth discussions.

For each strategy Zarnowski provides a rationale based on existing research, a procedure to follow when using that approach in the classroom, and samples of student work. Plentiful artwork throughout the text, a hefty reference section, and lists of recommended biographies, including picture books and full-length works, will help you get started with using biographies in your own classroom.

Scholastic's Biography Writer's Workshop

<http://teacher.scholastic.com/writewit/biograph/index.htm>

Here you can learn how to research and write a biographical sketch — a story about someone's life that tells a lot about who that person is or was. Along the way, you'll find research and writing strategies from us as well as a warm-up exercise to get you started. When you're done writing your biography, you can publish a biography of your own.

Create a Timeline

http://www.ourtimelines.com/create_tl_2c.html

This website generates a timeline through data input by students about their subject. It uses genealogy software that brings a visual dimension to a person's life.

Bio-Cube Planning from ReadWriteThink

http://www.readwritethink.net/files/resources/interactives/bio_cube/

This site helps students summarize their biography research with an interactive cube of questions.

50 Questions to get You Started

<http://www.greatlifestories.com/pressroom/article3.html>

Teacher, Mike Brozda, shares with writers his "cheat sheet" to get organized and get started when interviewing someone for a biography project.

For All Time: A Complete Guide to Writing Your Family History

By Charley Kempthorne

Published by Boynton/Cook Publishers, 1996

Family history writing can take many forms--a short essay or narrative introduction to a collection of family letters, long captions comprising a family photo history, a biography of parents and a narrative of their life together, an autobiography, or even a family newsletter. This sensible and accessible book is for those who want to do a little writing as well as for those who want to do a lot. The author, a former teacher and magazine editor and publisher who specializes in teaching family history, has combined his talents to produce this work. In four chapters, he discusses family history and its importance, includes techniques for writing family history, provides forms, and explains the methods of printing and publishing the histories.

Jump Start: How to Write from Everyday Life

By Robert Wolf

Published by Oxford University Press, 2001

Jump Start is a concise guide that offers Wolf's writing techniques from his Free River Press workshops across the country. Rooted in the oral tradition, Wolf's methods include storytelling, visualization, spontaneous prose composition, and sketching. Useful for both the individual and groups as well as for beginning or practiced writers, his concrete techniques are flexible enough to be applied towards any form (poetry, composition, non-fiction, plays, etc.). With the inclusion of writing samples from past workshop participants, Wolf's main emphasis is that people from all walks of life, even with no previous background in writing, may produce meaningful and memorable work.
