

Summer 2014

Reading (about Roosevelt) is Fundamental

Duane G. Jundt

Northwestern College - Orange City, djundt@nwcsiowa.edu

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Reading (about Roosevelt) Is Fundamental

by Duane G. Jundt



Michael Burgan, with illustrations by Jerry Hoare, *Who Was Theodore Roosevelt?*, Grosset & Dunlap, 2014, 106 pp.

Meg Chorlian, editor, "Theodore Roosevelt: Larger than Life," *Cobblestone*, Volume 35, Number 4, April 2014, 48 pp.

Doreen Rappaport, with illustrations by C.F. Payne, *To Dare Mighty Things: The Life of Theodore Roosevelt*, Disney • Hyperion Books, 2013, 42 pp.

Barb Rosenstock, with illustrations by Mordicai Gerstein, *The Camping Trip That Changed America: Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and Our National Parks*, Dial Books, 2012, 30 pp.

In titling her article about recent trends in children's books "Summer Reading for Parents," Cecilie Rohwedder of the *Wall Street Journal* makes some important points about this segment of the publishing industry.¹ Books intended for children not only must captivate and instruct young readers, but must also appeal to the adults (the parents, teachers, and librarians) who will make the final decisions on what titles to buy, and who will also, in many cases, become the readers of these books in homes, classrooms, and summer reading groups. And in the case of the large format picture books intended for some of the youngest

of readers, vocabulary and sentence structure will take a back seat to the illustrations whose creators are in effect co-authors of these titles.

The pictures by C.F. Payne that accompany Doreen Rappaport's *To Dare Mighty Things: The Life of Theodore Roosevelt* will elicit oohs and aahs from children and adults alike. The illustrations often bear witness to the book's title by placing Roosevelt in a corner or on the edge of a picture with the surrounding landscape (a series of mountain ridges,

a snowstorm in the Badlands, or the streets of New York City) looming over him and presenting him with a challenge or obstacle to overcome. Payne's depiction of the charge of the Rough Riders is simply magnificent, with a trace of Spanish bullets cutting the air, while his illustration of the quotation "I acted for the well-being of all of our people" shows Roosevelt exhorting a crowd of men and women, young and old, white and African American, that pays homage to the actual diversity of TR's time while gently reminding us that the diversity our society celebrates today may not be as newfound as we believe (p. 32).

While the intensity and the vividness of Payne's pictures make Rappaport's text pale in comparison, the narrative is enlivened by the liberal use of quotations from Roosevelt's speeches and writings, which are highlighted in the text by a much larger font that accentuates their importance and ensures that they cannot be overlooked by the reader. While a book aimed at young readers (in this case ages 6 to 8) need not attend to every detail and must paint its story in broad strokes, those familiar with Roosevelt's biography may flinch at some of the leeway exercised by Rappaport. For example, she writes that "news of vicious blizzards pulled Teddy back to the Dakotas. He saw how wildlife was disappearing from too much hunting and building." She follows this up by quoting Roosevelt: "The land was a barren waste. Not a green thing could be seen" (p. 15).

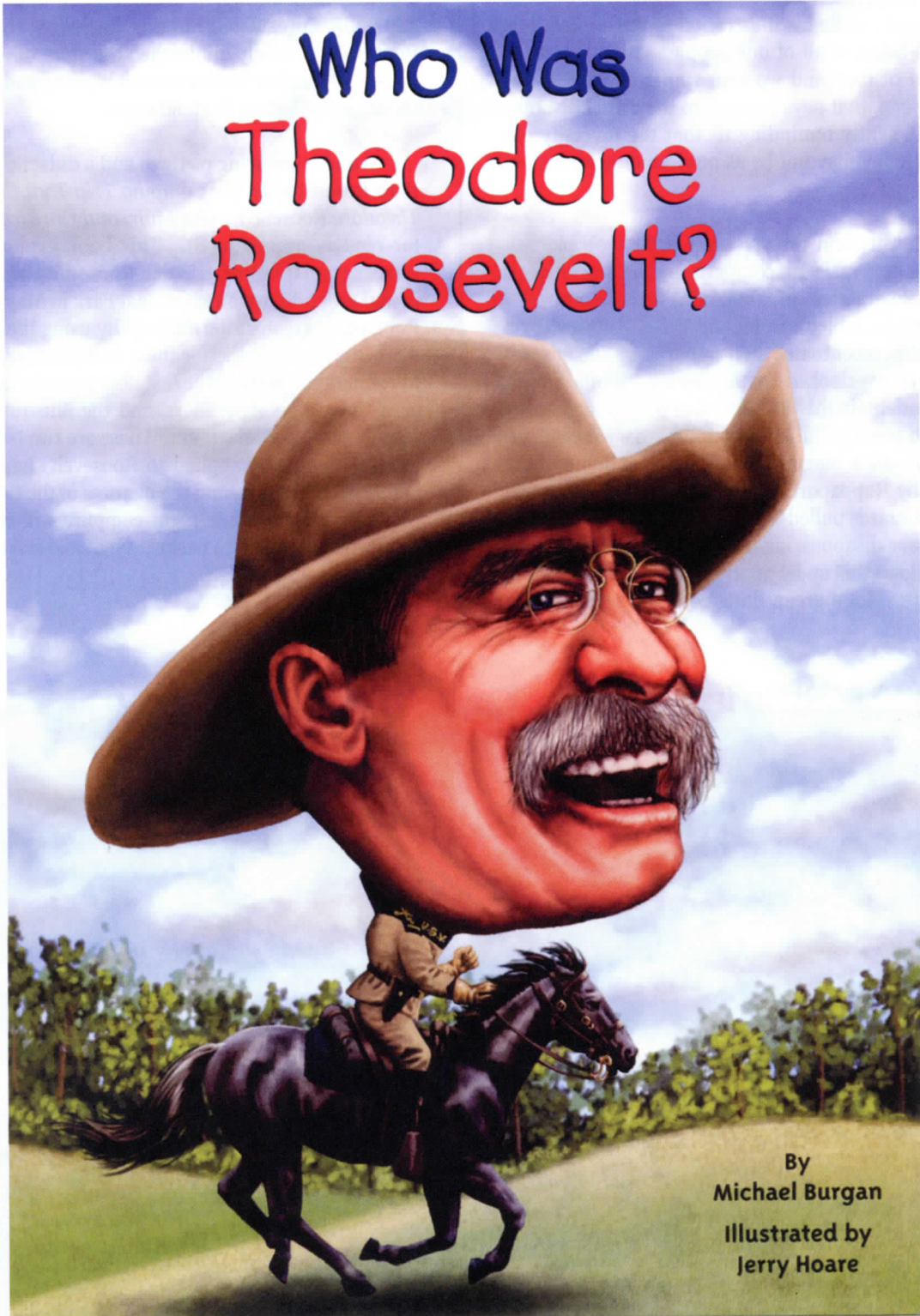
This sequence implies that the Badlands had been decimated solely by the actions of man, but their sterility in the spring of 1887 was primarily the result of the terrible drought of 1886 followed by a winter of such severity that it beggars belief; and while unregulated hunting (including that undertaken by Roosevelt) certainly diminished the store of wildlife, it was too many cattle rather than too much hunting and building that had the biggest effect on the landscape.

Wonder-inducing pictures and a didactic text join forces in Barb Rosenstock's *The Camping Trip That Changed America: Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, and Our National Parks* (also for readers ages 6 to 8). This book explores the three-day camping and tramping trip that Roosevelt and John Muir shared in and around Yosemite National Park in May of 1903 as part of Roosevelt's great western tour.² By using the childhood names of Teedie and Johnnie for these two giants of the conservation movement throughout the text, Rosenstock makes the two more accessible to young readers, and the illustrations by Mordicai Gerstein reinforce the point. These are two overgrown children (a label frequently applied to Roosevelt) happy to escape the bonds of civilization, and the pictures of the two of them talking excitedly around a late-night campfire will resonate with any child who has pitched a backyard tent and stayed up well beyond bedtime.



Stereoscope card showing President Theodore Roosevelt speaking to an audience of many children in 1903.

Who Was Theodore Roosevelt?



By
Michael Burgan
Illustrated by
Jerry Hoare

Like the readers for whom it is intended, this book lacks subtlety and nuance, but it does not lack an agenda, as it clearly promotes the idea of wilderness preservation: Two successive pages near the conclusion depart from the historical narrative and show contemporary Americans enjoying landscapes described in detail by Muir and preserved by President Roosevelt. But the book overreaches in both its title and its conclusion when Rosenstock claims that Roosevelt's "time in the forest turned the outdoor-loving President into one of nature's fiercest protectors" (p. 28). TR's credentials as a protector of nature stretched as far back as 1887 with the founding of the Boone and Crockett Club and extended into his time as governor of New York. The trip to Yosemite (and the earlier stop at the Grand Canyon) reinforced the President's inclinations and gave renewed purpose to his preservation plans, but those instincts were well-rooted before the excursion detailed in this volume.³

At a time in our culture when the cable news networks label every story as "Breaking News" and when every winter storm or tropical depression finds itself named and (here I embellish but not greatly) portrayed as a threat to the survival of the republic, we should not be surprised to find such exaggeration touching the realm of history. *The Camping Trip That Changed America* seems in line with recent Roosevelt books for adults that overplay their hand, such as Timothy Egan's *The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America* (2009) and John J. Miller's *The Big Scrum: How Teddy Roosevelt Saved Football* (2011).⁴ Perhaps this hyperbole extends from our tendency to highlight the heroic Roosevelt (as suggested as well by other titles [and subtitles] under consideration here like *To Dare Mighty Things* and "Larger Than Life") at the expense of the mundane, assigning extraordinary qualities to every action and placing the President on a pedestal where he is removed from the quotidian and the political. While children especially can benefit from learning about legitimate heroes like Roosevelt, TR is ultimately oversimplified if every aspect of his life must rise to the level of the heroic.

Remarkably free of tendentiousness and marked by a lively, well-paced, and well-written narrative, Michael Burgan's *Who Was Theodore Roosevelt?* (for children ages 8 to 12) adheres closely to its title by providing a straightforward, brief (at 101 compact pages) account of Roosevelt's life. Part of a popular *Who Was/Is* series of nonfiction titles from Grosset & Dunlap that is set to number 100 volumes by the summer of 2015, this book and the entire series reflect publishers' awareness of the need to provide more nonfiction titles for children in order to satisfy the demands of the Common Core State Standards, and because "parents and educators increasingly want children to read books . . . and factual texts [to] give children knowledge that will help them in other school subjects."⁵ Students also benefit as writers from reading the well-crafted prose of others; Burgan's text provides many good examples: "To some Roosevelt might have seemed *too* young. But he had almost two decades of political experience behind him and had demonstrated his courage on

the battlefield. And he could get along with anyone—from the cowboys he met in the American West to the wealthy people he knew in New York" (pp. 52-53).

While picture books intended for younger readers may be given some latitude in interpretation as they work with their illustrations to create an overall first impression of a historical figure, those texts aimed at older students for whom memorization and the retention of knowledge is important must be held to a higher standard regarding their presentation of facts. Burgan, the author of many children's books, commands a writing style perfectly suited to his audience; his command of the facts is sometimes not quite so sure. In relating the assassination attempt on Roosevelt during the 1912 presidential campaign, the text twice (since the incident is detailed in the prologue and in chapter 8) claims "Roosevelt fell to the ground" (pp. 1, 88); but candidate Roosevelt actually collapsed back into his automobile. On page 26, Burgan writes that "he [TR] bought more land and built a new ranch, which he named Elkhorn Ranch." In the days of open range cattle ranching, Roosevelt made a claim to the land, but he did not have to purchase it from the federal government. The text claims that Roosevelt died on a couch (p. 98); he died in bed. The "Timeline of the World" at the end of the book has World War I ending in 1919. These and other errors deny this otherwise valuable text a wholehearted endorsement.

Even though the April 2014 issue of *Cobblestone*, a magazine devoted to American history for readers ages 9 to 14, includes the contributions of thirteen different authors, it still manages over the course of forty-eight pages to produce a coherent biography of Roosevelt titled "Theodore Roosevelt: Larger Than Life." Although the coverage of Roosevelt's post-presidential career and larger legacy proves disappointing, these authors and editor Meg Chorlian have set a good example for their student readers, as they have evidently done their homework. The historical record is in order, and the magazine's staff clearly understands that "kids really respond to facts, photos, fun and all things animal,"⁶ as all of these are found in abundance in this issue. It makes good use of familiar Roosevelt photographs and period political cartoons, features a "Bully for Roosevelt" crossword puzzle, and has the obligatory page devoted to the Teddy bear, as well as an interview with Kermit Roosevelt III that looks at his relationships with his famous forbears. The well-researched, well-written, concise text features certain words highlighted in red ink and italics to enlarge readers' vocabulary. These words, such as philanthropic, monopoly, corollary, segregated, and ecosystem, are defined in small text boxes in the margins. Delightful original drawings by Chris Ware (reproduced on the front and back covers of this issue of the *TRA Journal*) are yet another notable feature.

Fans of Roosevelt's time in the Dakota Badlands will be pleased to learn that this issue of *Cobblestone* displays no less than five photographs of this remarkable landscape and that



the magazine in its “Spotlight On” feature declares: “When it comes to Theodore Roosevelt, there are plenty of special places to highlight. But we decided that the national park in North Dakota deserves to be singled out” (p. 46). In a reflection of the renewed respect for Roosevelt’s role in conservation and preservation precipitated by the publication of Douglas Brinkley’s *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* and Roosevelt’s starring role in Ken Burns’s national parks documentary (both from 2009), the issue devotes four pages to Roosevelt’s relationship with the natural world. In fact, all of the titles under review lend considerable space to this same topic, and as they do so they demonstrate the gradual, trickle-down nature of historical scholarship that often produces a reconsideration of a figure, even one as prominent as Roosevelt.

Another feature uniting all of these titles, and one that will be appreciated by both children and their parents, is the emphasis placed on Roosevelt as a father. In *The Camping Trip That Changed America*, Roosevelt declares about Yosemite that “my children should see this place,” and the text asks: “What if we could save the forests for all the children to come?” (pp. 19, 27) C.F. Payne’s depiction in *To Dare Mighty Things* of five of the Roosevelt children romping around the White House amidst a veritable zoo of pets will likely elicit pleas from readers for dogs, badgers, and guinea pigs of their own. The *Cobblestone* issue has four pages centered on the Roosevelt family, including a page focused solely on Princess Alice. While these texts are no doubt intended to entertain and to instruct children, parents may derive a lesson from them as well, and one that would certainly be valued by the young readers nestled in their arms and laps. As Michael Burgan relates in *Who Was Theodore Roosevelt?*, “he [TR] also often told his children how much he loved and missed them and their mother. The brave hunter and soldier had a soft heart when it came to his family” (p. 70).



Duane G. Jundt, a member of the Advisory Board of the Theodore Roosevelt Association and a frequent contributor to the TRA Journal, teaches “The Rise and Fall of the British Empire” and “War and the American Experience” at Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa.



Endnotes

¹ Cecilie Rohwedder, “Summer Reading for Parents,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 25, 2014, p. D1.

² *The Camping Trip That Changed America* bears an uncanny resemblance in substance and style to Ginger Wadsworth’s 2009 children’s book *Camping with the President* (Honesdale, PA: Boyds Mill Press).

³ Douglas Brinkley exercises more restraint in describing the first night of Muir’s and Roosevelt’s outing on May 15, 1903, as “the most famous campfire ever in the annals of the conservation movement.” Brinkley, *The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), p. 539.

⁴ Regarding the latter, see Duane G. Jundt, “Fourth Down and Ted,” *Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal*, Vol. XXXIV, Nos. 1, 2, & 3, Winter-Spring-Summer 2013, pp. 51-53.

⁵ Rohwedder, “Summer Reading for Parents,” p. D2.

⁶ *Ibid.*

