

Children's Books: Lives of Art and Inspiration

Illustrated biographies about Henri Matisse, a Victorian portrait photographer and the inventor of the Ferris wheel.



Susan Goldman Rubin's "Stand There! She Shouted" Candlewick Press
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As **brief** as illustrated biographies for children generally are, they can sometimes provide a more immersive experience than the hefty tomes written for adults. A reader can't go terribly deeply into a subject's life in a handful of pages, of course, but he has the compensating pleasure of a continual supply of pictures that, in weightier books, tend to be crammed together into glossy sections far from the chapters they refer to.

A young child will not simply read about Henri Matisse, for instance, in Patricia MacLachlan's "**The Iridescence of Birds**" (**Roaring Brook, 40 pages, 17.99**) but will, from the very first page, experience the artist's vibrant aesthetic through Hadley Hooper's illustrated homage. We get a nice sense of the continuity of Matisse's interest in color and form by meeting him as a little boy "in a dreary town in northern France where the skies were gray." His mother paints, hangs bright rugs on the walls, and lets her son arrange the fruits and flowers she buys at the market: "pears and oranges in a bowl, on a tablecloth, and flowers in a blue vase." Each description in this elegant book for 4- to 8-year-olds is accompanied by a Matisse-inspired print that leads us to see how such a child grew into the artist whose joyful works drew record museum crowds this very year.

A more detailed, richly illustrated encounter awaits older readers ages 9-15 in Susan Goldman Rubin's "**Stand There! She Shouted**" (**Candlewick, 80 pages, \$16.99**), which narrates the life story of the Victorian portrait photographer Julia Margaret Cameron.

Eccentric, aesthete and mother of six, Cameron moved in a literary and artistic crowd that included Alfred Tennyson and the painters of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. Using her camera—in those early days a device so heavy that it took two men to move it—she sought to “arrest all beauty that came before me,” as she put it. The portraits she shot that appear here are slightly soft-focus and dreamy, bearing the ethereal look (disparaged by some) that became her hallmark.

For her story, the illustrator Bagram Ibatoulline has outdone himself—such talent poured out for the enjoyment of children, lucky things!—by channeling the Pre-Raphaelite ethos. Here is a picture of the young Julia and her sister chasing about on a ship’s deck, rendered as if by William Holman Hunt himself with bright, almost harsh colors and lines. In another striking illustration, we see Julia at the Louvre, gazing at a Raphael: Just as in life, the framed painting seems softer and more delicate and yet more intensely real than everything around it. This is a sumptuously beautiful book from start to finish. Indeed, “beautiful” was apparently the last word to leave Julia Margaret Cameron’s lips.

In a final picture-book biography for 2014, we aren’t so much gobsmacked by beauty as exhilarated by a marvel of doggedness and engineering. Illustrator Gilbert Ford uses slightly goofy figures and a delicious palette of violets, blues, indigos and yellowy greens to represent a bold inventor’s story in **“Mr. Ferris and His Wheel” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 40 pages, \$17.99).**

Like almost every individual who has created something impressive from nothing but the ideas in his own head, George Washington Gale Ferris Jr. was a bit of an oddball. Growing up in 19th-century Nevada, he had watched a waterwheel at a mill and wished that he could somehow ride on it. It was this boyish longing that inspired him to conceive of a vast invention to wow the public at the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. France had amazed the world with the Eiffel Tower; why should not America show its flair with a giant wheel?

As Kathryn Gibbs Davis explains in this informative and entertaining account, the determined inventor faced obstacles almost as imposing as his wheel would be: no official funding, very little time and quicksand at the building site. Yet by opening day—hurrah!—the wheel turned, and the passengers went “up, up, up” and “quietly floated above the mud and noise” of the fair.