

Books as Oases for Readers: A Critical Content Analysis of the Portrayal of Oprah Winfrey in Biographies for Youth

Biographies for children have been criticized for being mainly about white males, particularly historical figures; for being too formulaic in format; and for positioning its subjects as heroic and infallible. Despite the critique of the genre over the years, most youth, especially adolescents craving to hear about “real” people, continue to turn to biography more readily than to any other type of literature. Scholars have noted that contemporary biographies offer young readers subjects with qualities they can emulate, learn from, be inspired by, identify with, and avoid (Bond, 2011; Martin, 2004; Seger, 1981).

A number of biographies have been written to introduce children to Oprah Winfrey, the girl who grew up destitute on a farm in segregated Mississippi (read as “real” person) and became a mogul (read as “unlikely [s]hero”) (Martin, 2004). I chose to focus on Oprah because she has been credited with making an impact on education, particularly advocating for positioning books as oases for readers. My critical content analysis (Beach et al.) framed by black feminist thought, was guided by the following question: What are children’s books saying about Oprah? Particularly, the paper will explore how Oprah is represented in relation to perspectives about black womanhood and on how her life story is played out on the stage of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s and the feminist movement of the 1970s.

Considering the number of biographies available, I selected 9 published biographies. One is a collective biography in picture book format: Chelsea Clinton’s *She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed the World* (2017). Four are picture books: Wil Mara’s *Oprah Winfrey: An Inspiration to Millions* (2005); Heather C. Hudak’s *Oprah Winfrey* (2006); Stephen Feinstein’s *Oprah Winfrey* (2007); and Carole Boston Weatherford’s *Oprah: The Little Speaker* (2010). One is a slightly longer “picture book” or what Kunze (2013) calls a “hybrid” (p. 5): Tanya Lee Stone’s *Oprah Winfrey: Success with an Open Heart* (2001). The final three are chapter books: Belinda Friedrich’s *Oprah Winfrey* (2001); Robin Westin’s *Oprah Winfrey: I Don’t Believe in Failure* (2005); and Sherry Beck Paprocki’s *Oprah Winfrey: Talk Show Host and Media Magnate* (2006).

While critical content analysis allows me to focus on power/agency/self-hood, black feminism informed my examination and critique of race, class, and gender construction within the biographies (Collins, 2000). Thus, a critical content analysis of how Oprah is represented in children’s biography provides insight into the types of stories that are written not only about Oprah, but also about black womanhood, civil rights, and gender roles.

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