



8. Frida Kahlo picturebook biographies: Facts and fiction in words and images

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Abstract This chapter investigates three picturebook biographies about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. The main aim is to discuss how the biographies describe and adapt the artist's life story and art through the interplay of text and illustrations. Based on theories of biography, adaptation, and ekphrasis, the study finds that the books' visual style, motifs and art references influence the factual and aesthetic aspects of the biographies as much as the verbal accounts do.

Keywords nonfiction picturebooks, biographies, Frida Kahlo, adaptations, ekphrasis

INTRODUCTION

Life stories about outstanding persons represent a long-lasting and popular genre within children's literature. However, the selection of biographies for young readers has been continuously extended, and this is the case also considering the genre's modes of expression. Traditionally, biographies have consisted of verbal accounts supplemented by some elements of illustrations. The increase in the visibility of children's nonfiction over the last decades, therefore marks a contrast to the more scarcely illustrated nonfiction of the past (Sanders, 2017, p. 25). As part of this general trend, an increasing number of picturebook biographies for children have been published (von Merveldt, 2018, p. 233). Thereby, a crucial question is: How do the dynamics of words and images affect ways of communicating life stories and documentary information in picturebook biographies?

This chapter investigates three examples of picturebook biographies about the Mexican painter Frida Kahlo. As typical for the biography genre, all three titles include the name of the artist: *Frida Kahlo* (2016) by Isabel Sánchez Vegara and

Gee Fan Eng, *Me, Frida* (2010) by Amy Novesky and David Diaz, and *Frida* (2002) by Jonah Winter and Ana Juan. The main aim of this chapter is to discuss how these books describe and adapt the artist's life story and art through the interplay of text and illustrations.

While not widely recognized in her lifetime, Kahlo (1907–1954) has during the last decades become one of the most renowned painters from the last century. Today, Kahlo appears as a cultural icon, overly exposed not the least as a result of commercial interests. One may therefore ask if this huge exposure undermines her artistic legacy, her role as a progressive leftist activist and her position as a cultural profile, engaged in Mexican cultural heritage as well as in modern contemporary culture. Obviously, this critical perspective is relevant to studies of Kahlo biographies, and this chapter attends to the issue by exploring whether the selected books tend to convey unbalanced and heroic views or succeed to present more nuanced and multifaceted descriptions of Kahlo's life and art.

The high number of children's books about Kahlo published over the last couple of decades reflects the artist's status as a cultural icon. The children's books are spanning biographies, art history books, fictitious stories, poetry books, informational books and activity books (Bjørlo, 2018, p. 230). Thus, the books to be discussed here are selected from a wide range of genres and titles.

Recent life story accounts and art critiques about Kahlo build upon former biographies and art studies, and Hayden Herrera's book, *Frida. A biography of Frida Kahlo* (1983) stands out as ground-breaking. Herrera's interpretations of how Kahlo's art is connected to her experiences of illness, love affairs, and identity issues, as well as to her Mexican background and political convictions, have influenced a wide spectrum of Kahlo-portraits and studies within a wide range of genres and media.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES

While this chapter is informed by discussions and art studies about Kahlo's life and art, the main theoretical frames are based on generic biography studies, adaptation theory, and theories of ekphrases. Michael Benton (2011), a prominent theorist of the biography genre, claims that biography is "a hybrid genre that is grounded in history but shares many of the characteristics of fiction" (p. 68). The hybridity of the genre may also include interactions between the written text and various visual elements. However, the presence of illustrations has attained limited scholarly attention (Vie, 2020, p. 21). One contribution is the study of visual

portraiture in a selection of new Norwegian biographies for children and young adults (Vie, 2020). In another study, Clémentine Beauvais (2020, p. 64) claims that examples of innovative qualities in a selection of recent picturebook biographies, mostly appear within the iconotexts. According to Beauvais (2020), the iconotexts prove to challenge traditional concepts of biographies for children by “playing with both idealization and historical factuality in their representation of human lives” (p. 64). Obviously, there is a need for further investigations on how picturebook biographies combine visual as well as verbal modes of expression in their aesthetics.

One approach is to investigate the picturebook biographies from the perspective of adaptation theory. A biographer will have to reconstruct, but also to recreate, various sources and accounts from a life story. In picturebook biographies, visual forms of adaptations are as important as verbal ones, not least when the biographee is a visual artist. Linda Hutcheon (2006) defines adaptation as “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works” (p. 7). Similarly, Julie Sanders (2006) explains adaptation as a “sustained engagement with a single text or a source” in contrast to “the more glancing act of illusion” (p. 13). In the selected picturebooks, some of the adapted art works are announced by titles, some are not. Still, since the context of Kahlo’s art is evident, one may therefore argue that the books include extensive ways of adapting either specific art works or certain visual motifs. Readers with some knowledge of Kahlo’s art would quite easily spot the picturebooks’ specific art references. The books do not presuppose such knowledge, rather they guide their readers to experience the visual and verbal content within the general frame of Kahlo’s life and oeuvre.

In addition, this study is informed by theories of ekphrasis. Traditionally, the concept of ekphrasis has been understood as literary works of art describing visual works of art. This understanding has been further developed: “*ekphrasis is the verbal representation of visual representation*” (Heffernan, 1993, p. 3, original italics). However, today, works of intermedial modes of expression, such as picturebooks, can also be viewed as ekphrases (Bjørlo, 2018, p. 56). From the perspective of ekphrasis, one may examine how specific artworks are described both visually and verbally. Furthermore, scenes from art galleries and art museums appear to be a frequent topos within ekphrastic literature (Heffernan, 1993, p. 139; Loizeux, 2008, p. 21), and so does the topos of the artist at work, characterized as “ekphrases of creation” (Loizeux, 2008, p. 13). In the selected picturebook biographies there are several scenes depicting Kahlo with her palette and easel, and two of the books also include art gallery scenes. These recurrent motifs contribute to making the ekphrastic approach relevant.

This chapter specifically investigates and compares how the two paintings, *Frieda and Diego Rivera*¹ (1931) and *The Two Fridas* (1939), are adapted and referred to in the selected books, and more briefly comments on references to other artworks.

FRIDA KAHLO (2016): LITTLE PEOPLE, BIG DREAMS

Frida Kahlo (Vegara & Eng, 2016)² is part of the *Little People, BIG DREAMS* series, spanning more than 60 picturebook biographies published from 2014 onwards, and the series is still expanding. The books are all written by Vegara, who has cooperated with various illustrators. The series has gained wide popularity, and several books have been translated into various languages. At first the series only featured female characters, but lately several male characters have been included.

The series wants to explore “(...) the lives of outstanding people, from designers and artists to scientists and activists. All of them achieved incredible things, yet each began life as a child with a dream” (Vegara & Eng, 2016, back page). The words “outstanding” and “incredible” suggest a heroic perspective, a prevailing mode in biographies for children, partly due to the didactic tradition of exemplum in children’s literature (Goga, 2008, p. 162). However, recent children’s biographies tend to present more nuanced descriptions (Goga, 2014, p. 76). Accordingly, it is pertinent to examine whether the *Little People, BIG DREAMS* series succeeds in creating not only exemplary, but also more multifaceted biographical portraits.

The front-page image of *Frida Kahlo* conveys many well-known features of the artist, such as her striking eyebrows, hair decorations with ribbons and flowers, abundant jewelry and colorful Mexican clothing. The naïve visual style of this cover portrait clearly addresses the young child reader, a common feature of front pages in this biography series. The portraiture of Kahlo has a rather naïve style throughout the book, characterized by simplifications in verbal as well as visual ways of expression. This strategy is presumably due to the intended child audience of age 5+.

The back-cover typically accentuates the traffic accident Kahlo experienced as a teenager, which caused her lifelong injuries and pains, but also inspired her to paint. Thus, the blurb conveys a much-repeated theme of how Kahlo managed to become an artist despite her physical limitations and severe pains.

1 Kahlo occasionally spelt her name «Frieda», according to German spelling.

2 The book was first published in Spain under the title *Pequeño & Grande Frida Kahlo* (2014) by Alba Editorial. The English version, titled *Frida Kahlo*, is translated by Emma Martinez, published in 2016 by Frances Lincoln Children’s Books, UK.

The story has a classic lifespan structure, a typical pattern within the biography genre. As highlighted by Benton (2011), reading biographies makes us aware of the temporal gaps that are left unfilled, and thus, paradoxically, the biographer has to counter these gaps by employing literary devices to enrich the story and “to animate its historical data” (pp. 71–72). In a short biography like *Frida Kahlo*, the temporal gaps are very evident. The verbal text gives rather short and straightforward information about a few selected events in Kahlo’s life. However, the interaction of verbal and visual storytelling contributes to the animation of historical data and to the enlightening accounts of daily life, events, and specific works of art.

Doublespread 9 (see Fig. 8.1) includes an adaptation of the painting *Frieda and Diego Rivera* (1931). Kahlo made this painting, which is characterized as a wedding portrait, while she was staying for some months in San Francisco with her husband Diego Rivera (Herrera, 1983, p. 123). By then Rivera (1886–1957) was a widely acknowledged painter of murals, while Kahlo still was in the beginning of her artistic career.

The verbal text does not mention the particular artwork, rather it highlights the couple’s relationship: “Frida and Diego fell in love. They were so similar, and yet so different. But through their ups and downs, Diego encouraged Frida in her paintings.”



Figure 8.1 *Frida Kahlo* (2016), by Sánchez Vegara and Gee Fan Eng, Frances Lincoln Children’s Books.

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painting” (doublespread 9). The visual portrait, however, refers clearly to the original painting. The couple appears in the same type of clothes and in similar postures as in Kahlo’s own painting. The image of a ribbon is also a common feature, except that the much longer original inscription is shortened into the statement “Just married”. The inclusion of ribbon inscriptions derives from Mexican colonial painting, a device used by both Kahlo and Rivera in several art works (Herrera, 1983, p. 123).

The doublespread invites to enjoy a rather playful depiction of the wedding scene, not least by the inclusion of two skeleton figures in Mexican clothing on top of the cake. The skeleton miniatures refer to Mexican traditions, particularly to the popular celebrations of The Day of Dead. Kahlo often refers to Mexican folk tradition in her artworks, not seldom by including skull and skeleton motifs (Herrera, 1983, p. 17). By combining the wedding portrait with the more humorous wedding cake scene, the doublespread exposes “the tension between the familiar and the new”, to quote Sanders (2006, p. 14) on how adaptations repeat as well as recreate previous works.

The scene with the newly married couple is followed by a scene with a clear reference to Kahlo’s famous double self-portrait, *The Two Fridas* (1939). The painting depicts two look-alike women sitting side by side on a bench while holding hands (doublespread 10, see Fig. 8.2). Kahlo made this painting shortly after her



Figure 8.2 *Frida Kahlo* (2016), by Sánchez Vegara and Gee Fan Eng, Frances Lincoln Children’s Books.

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divorce from Rivera, whom she later remarried. The painting has been subject to various interpretations. Most prominently it has been related to the artist's sufferings and disappointments during her breaking up with Rivera (Herrera, 1983, p. 278). Secondly, it has been related to identity issues. The dress in color is viewed as a symbol of Kahlo's Mexican heritage, and the white dress in Victorian style as a symbol of her European heritage through her German-born father (p. 278). Finally, the painting has been viewed as an example of Kahlo's artistic exploration of bodily as well as emotional experiences (p. 279).

The doublespread's short text refers to emotional traits in Kahlo's artworks: "In her fantastic pictures Frida showed her feelings. In some paintings she was sad, in others she smiled" (doublespread 10). The statement has an ekphrastic function underscored by depicting the artist at work in front of *The Two Fridas*. As mentioned, descriptions of art studio scenes may be characterized as "ekphrases of creation" (Loizeux, 2008, p. 13). Furthermore, the illustration echoes Kahlo's double self-portrait by adding a reversed image of the portrait in a mirror. In the reflected image Frida sheds tears, and thus, the illustration expands on the verbal statement.

The adaptation of the painting includes significant details from the original work, such as the heart organs, blood veins, and the surgical pincers. These are elements likely to make the reader wonder about their meaning and how they possibly may describe Kahlo's emotions and experiences. As Joe Sutliff Sanders (2017) points out, highlighting vulnerability of the characters of nonfiction, "becomes an important opportunity for critical engagement" (p. 83). Thus, the visual and verbal descriptions of this doublespread possibly might engage readers to ask questions and to involve in the character's vulnerability.

The book's endpapers, displaying black and white dots on a red background, are not easily interpreted by the first sight. But arriving at the last doublespread, the reader will discover the resemblance with the watermelon motif. The watermelons refer to Kahlo's very last painting, *Viva la Vida* (1954) completed only ten days before she died. The painting, in which the motto "Viva la Vida" is inscribed in one of the watermelon pieces, has been interpreted as Kahlo's tribute to the joy of life despite her pain and illness. Thus, the book's adaptation of this painting corresponds with the back-cover text and its highlighting of Kahlo's "passion for life and instinct of survival". In the last doublespread this assumed attitude of hers is described as an exemplum: "Frida Kahlo taught the world to wave goodbye to bad things and say, 'Viva la Vida' ... 'Live life'" (Vegara & Eng, doublespread 13). Considering Kahlo's complex life story, this claim seems unbalanced. On the other hand, these citations echo traditional biography endings. Closures allow

the biographer “to allegorize the whole life in a miniature” (Benton, 2011, p. 75). Though the narrational tactics may differ, Benton (2011) states, an ending tends to possess “a moral dimension since it invariably contains questions about the significance and meaning of the life” (p. 76). Most often a closure would include summative considerations of weaknesses as well as strengths of the biographee. However, in biographies for children, the exemplum tradition still seems to be quite strong.

The book includes an epilogue with a short documentary text, illustrated by four historical photos. The imprint page includes a list of other reads about Kahlo and a link to the web page of the Frida Kahlo Museum in Mexico City. To complement a story-based account with a strictly informational text and a list of sources appears to be quite a common feature in nonfiction picturebooks for children, not least in picturebook biographies. The verbal and visual storytelling, combined with sections of historical information, demonstrates the hybrid character of the biography genre.

ME, FRIDA (2010): A TRAVELOGUE AND THE BECOMING OF AN ARTWORK

Me, Frida (Novesky & Diaz, 2010) is an example of what Benton (2011) calls a ‘microlife story’ (p. 70). The book concentrates on one specific period in Kahlo’s life: her stay in San Francisco with her husband from November 1930 until June 1931. Rivera was commissioned to paint murals in the city, thereby Kahlo went with him on her first visit to the US. *Me, Frida* relies on historical facts about the couple’s stay in San Francisco, which is well documented in various sources (Herrera, 1983, pp. 114–127), but anecdotal and artistic devices supplement factual elements.

The front page of *Me, Frida* depicts the main character with a fairyland look, highlighted by the shining golden dots around her hair, almost like a halo (see Fig. 8.3). However, the portrait also alludes to well-known photos of Kahlo – and to some of her own self-portraits – showing the artist in outstanding outfits and appearances. In *Me, Frida*, the artist appears in new costumes on every single doublespread, which highlights her performative role. The illustrator’s use of intense colors and a folk/naïve style also recalls devices in Kahlo’s art.

Early on, the book highlights the theme of traveling by describing Frida and Diego on their way to San Francisco. The second doublespread image unfolds a dreamlike scene by showing the couple flying in the air like two birds on their wings. Thus, the scene metaphorically highlights the dreams and hopes of the 23-year-old Kahlo on her first trip abroad. Further on, the story includes several features from the travelogue genre, which allow the readers and viewers to explore the city along with Frida.

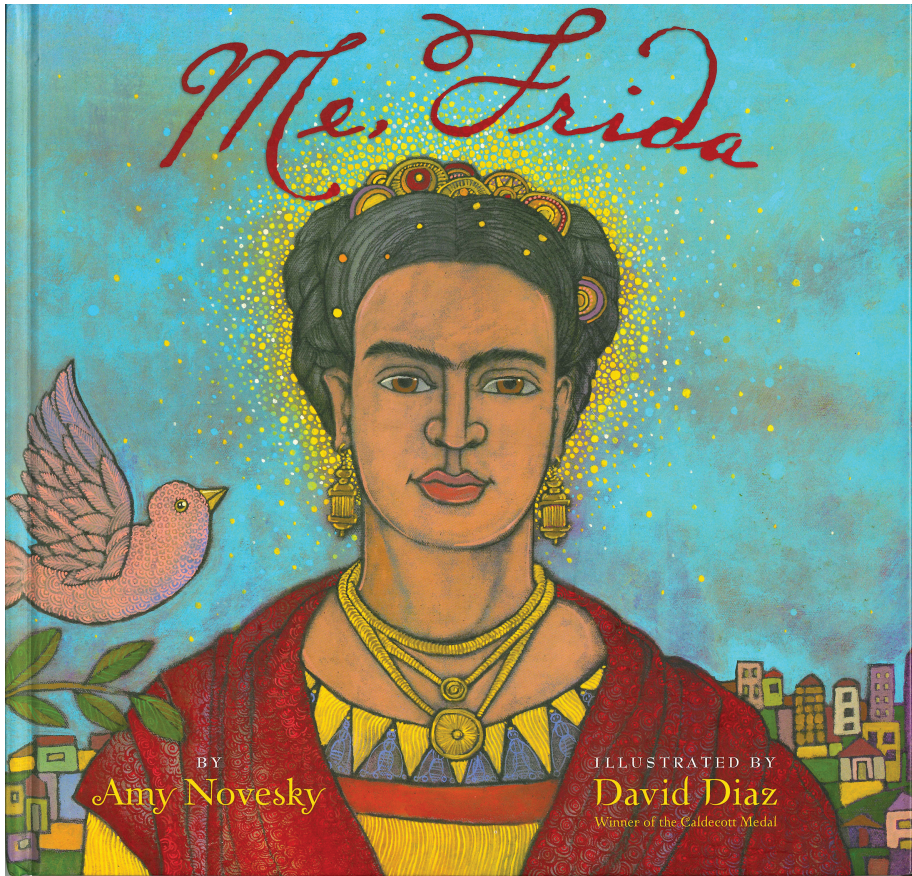


Figure 8.3 *Me, Frida* (2010), by Amy Novesky and David Diaz, Abrams Books for Young Readers.

The story describes how the process of getting to know the city and making new acquaintances inspired Frida to find new ways of painting: “That night, Frida painted something great: a colorful wedding portrait of herself and Diego”. Thus, the book may be read as an artwork ekphrasis, or an “ekphrasis of creation”, to apply Loizeux’s term (2008, p. 21). The book ends with an art gallery scene, which includes Kahlo’s *Frieda and Diego Rivera*. The scene refers to a factual gallery show in San Francisco, which proved to be an important event in Kahlo’s career. Thus, the book also may be read as a *Bildung* story of how Kahlo evolves into the role of an artist.

The book’s title may signal a first-person narrative, but rather the story proves to be a third-person narrative. However, in the penultimate doublespread, Kahlo’s

own voice manifests itself by a citation from the ribbon inscription in the original painting: “Here you see us, me, Frida Kahlo, with my adored husband Diego Rivera. I painted these portraits in the beautiful city of San Francisco, California ... in April 1931” (doublespread 13). The observant reader will see that the book title is derived from this inscription.

The ultimate doublespread describes a gallery scene identified as *The Sixth Annual Exhibition of the San Francisco Society of Women Artists* where the painting *Frieda and Diego Rivera* was exhibited. Thus, the scene is an example of an art gallery ekphrasis, which, as mentioned, is a prominent topos in classic, as well as in modern ekphrases (Heffernan, 1993, p. 139; Loizeux, 2008, p. 21). Frida is standing in front of her painting in an astonishing outfit, which again brings attention to the artist’s performative role. The painting is not displayed in its entirety, we can only spot parts of it in the background, but one element works as a synecdoche for this painting throughout the book. The pink bird, first introduced on the front page and repeated in several doublespreads, works as a visual leitmotif, leading to the enlarged image of the bird and the ribbon in the penultimate page.

The book’s epilogue includes an author’s note and a small reproduction of *Frieda and Diego Rivera*. The text states that the artwork “was the first painting Frida created in the style for which she would become famous” (Novesky and Diaz, 2010), and informs that today the painting is owned by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. The epilogue thus provides verbal as well as visual information suited to support the documentary elements in the story.

The vibrant illustrations by Diaz, who earned a Caldecott medal for the book, adds a rather stunning atmosphere to the story. However, the book’s emphasis on Kahlo’s colorful appearances tends to support a rather stereotyped characterization. Moreover, the book describes Kahlo’s first visit in the US as an overall harmonious experience, and thus, leaves out the artist’s ambivalent attitude to the US, which she sarcastically called “Gringolandia” (Herrera, 1983, p. 114). On the other hand, the micro life perspective and the choice to describe the becoming of one specific painting, allow to avoid some of the much-repeated topics to be found in most short life span biographies about Kahlo.

FRIDA (2002): FICTITIOUS COMPANIONS, TWO FRIDAS AND HUMMINGBIRDS

Frida (Winter & Juan, 2002) deals with Kahlo’s childhood as well as her adult life. Short text passages with a simple sentence structure indicate a young audience, not unlike the Kahlo-biography in the *Little People, BIG DREAMS* series. The front

page visualizes the artist as a child character with a palette and a paint brush, thereby addressing the child reader. However, with its rather subtle art references, the book also addresses more experienced readers.

In one of the childhood scenes the text explains how Frida makes up an imaginary friend (doublespread 3). The illustration depicts two look-alike Frida-girls flying in the air while holding each other's hands. This scene is based on diary notes by Kahlo, dated 1940: "Thirty-four years have passed since I experienced this magic friendship and every time that I remember it, it revives and becomes larger and larger inside of my world" (Kahlo cited in Herrera, 1983, p. 15). In the same note Kahlo explains that her memory of this imaginary friend was the origin of *The Two Fridas* (Herrera, 1983, p. 15). Though the picturebook does not include a clear reference to this painting, the scene with the two Frida-girls allows informed readers to fill in with knowledge about the connections to her famous double self-portrait. But of course, readers may enjoy the scene without such knowledge.

The artist's note by the end explains why the illustrator has included a group of quaint characters throughout the book "I have portrayed traditional characters in Mexican folk art – funny skeletons, little devils, sweet jaguars and others – as constant companions throughout her life" (Winter & Juan, 2002). These fictitious companions appear as joyous, sad, or comforting, according to what situations are being described. Since never mentioned in the text, these characters have a complementary and expanding function. One example is a scene with the adult artist at work by her easel, again a reference to the art studio topos (doublespread 10, see Fig. 8.4). The text explains: "Instead of crying she paints pictures of herself crying", (doublespread 10), while the image exposes her fictitious companions all in tears. As already pointed to, the idea that the artist expresses her feelings through her works of art, is a much-repeated theme in the Kahlo-tradition. However, the presence of her bizarre companions gives a humorous and refreshing touch to this conventional theme.

The hummingbird motif on the title page and the ultimate doublespread points to the same motif in two Kahlo-works, the painting *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird* (1940) and the drawing *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Marte R. Gomez* (1946). The painting from 1940 includes the motif of a dead hummingbird attached to a necklace of thorn twigs encircling the woman's neck. This motif has been interpreted to symbol pain, loss, and sorrow as well as a deep connection to hummingbirds (Herrera, 1983, p. 282). The self-portrait from 1946 expands on this theme. Here, the hummingbird motif is inscribed directly onto the image of the artist's face, and thus, the drawing suggests a strong identification with the bird.



Figure 8.4 *Frida* (2002), by Jonah Winter and Ana Juan, Francis Lincoln Children's Books.

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In the picturebook the hummingbird motif first appears on the title page. The illustration depicts a big sun with a facial expression, a motif which points to the painting *Sun and Life* (1947). However, since the sun's face also includes a hummingbird, the title page image alludes to the hummingbird motif as well as to the sun motif in Kahlo's works.

The ultimate doublespread of *Frida* revisits and extends the hummingbird motif. The illustration includes images of several small hummingbirds flying around the artist with thorn twigs in their beaks, thereby alluding to *Self-Portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird*. Besides, the illustration depicts the adult artist with a hummingbird figure inscribed onto her face, a reference to Kahlo's self-portrait from 1946. Thus, this doublespread offers readers who know the original works, to explore the intervisual dialogues. For other readers the presence of hummingbirds may invite to wonder and curiosity; not all questions need to be answered within the frames of the book.

The book's last words, "She turns her pain into something beautiful", express a conclusive perspective that occurs in many Kahlo biographies for children. As such, *Frida* does not avoid a sentimental version of the artist's struggles. However, the inclusion of playful elements, advanced intervisual dialogues, and relatively informative accounts of the artist's life and art generates a more nuanced portrait compared to the other life span biography discussed here, *Frida Kahlo in the Little People, BIG DREAMS* series. One reason may be that the concept of biography series for children demands certain common standards of formats

and content, while independent titles have a wider scope of freedom, as pointed to by Linda Walvoord Girard (1989). The recent boom of picturebook biography series for young children calls for further research on this issue.

CONCLUSION

The over-arching aim for this chapter has been to investigate how the dynamics of words and images affect aesthetic and informational aspects of picturebook biographies. Exemplified by Kahlo picturebook biographies, the analyses demonstrate that choices of visual styles, motifs and art references influence factual and aesthetic aspects as much as the verbal accounts do. By reading the biographies in the perspectives of adaptation and ekphrasis, it becomes clear that intertextual and intervisual dialogues with sources *outside* the picturebooks are as important as the dialogue between text and illustrations *within* the books. Dialogues with external verbal and visual sources proves to be a generic quality of nonfiction picturebooks. Thus, the idea of iconotext, in the sense of visual and verbal interactions within a single book (Hallberg, 1982), needs to be supplemented by a broader intermedial, intervisual, and intertextual approach. Consequently, the recent trend of picturebook biographies generates a need for further investigations on how they combine a manifold of documentary and artistic devices in their visual and verbal strategies.

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