

Book Reviews: Autobiographies for Learning



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Autobiographies: Giants of Science

Reviewed by [Elaine S. Weiner](#)

Introduction

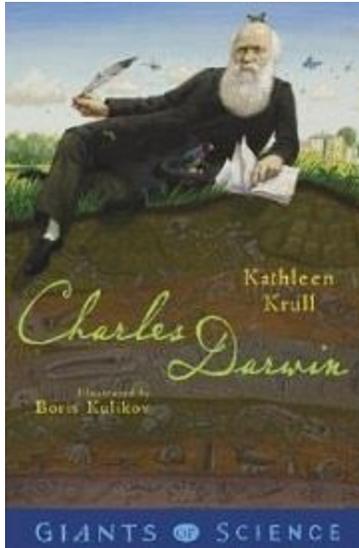
Selecting and reading a STACK OF BOOKS can be much more intriguing than reading a single book. The four reviews below of autobiographies represent a STACK OF BOOKS that share the lives of famous individuals who share some of the attributes of gifted students. Elaine Weiner has identified the attributes and experiences of four “gifted” individuals and their development as innovators and contributors. Who these people were, help us define who we can be.

How to Use Autobiographies for Learning

Introduce the nature and purposes of autobiographies as a genre and the importance of reading to “identify the self with others.” Think about these activities that can be completed as students read the autobiographies:

Write a brief profile that connects the individual in the autobiography to a fictional character in a story or real individual you know.

- Create a portrait that depicts in words or pictures the individual in the autobiography.
- Develop a set of interview questions that could be asked to the individual in the autobiography that were not addressed and/or answered in the text.



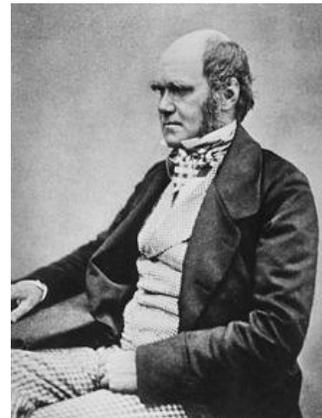
Review Charles Darwin (February 12, 1809 – April 19, 1882)

(2010) Charles Darwin by Kathleen Krull
Viking Publications, Hardcover \$15.99, 141pp, ISBN 978-0-670-06335-2

Reviewed by [Elaine S. Weiner](#)

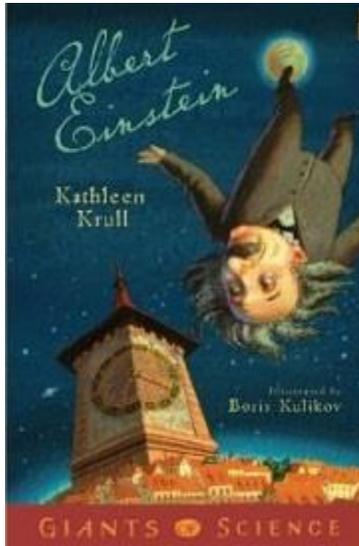
“Charles Darwin was an all-around nice guy. Everyone liked him—he was modest, agreeable, a sweetheart. A respectable Victorian gent, devoted to his wife and kids... A mild-mannered soul who much preferred puttering in his garden to public speaking. A dutiful son, a loving brother. Kind to his servants. Allergic to conflict. Shy and afflicted with odd ailments, including vomiting so severe that he kept a bowl in his study so as not to disturb the family.” There is a special rhythm that the author, Kathleen Krull, uses to attract young book lovers. She integrates

incomplete sentences as we speak in real life to bring her readers right into the dialogue. And Boris Kulikov, the illustrator, incorporates such wit into his sensitive pen drawings that they would feel at home in a museum for all to see. Darwin noticed everything. He noticed that animals continuously changed and adapted. He created a theory that explained just how species do change and adapt. We now call that model the theory of evolution. He knew there were people who would disagree with him, and to avoid such a fight, he delayed publishing his work. We refer to that as Darwin’s Delay. It took Charles Darwin 20 years to publish his original work because he was so afraid of the backlash. His hunches were correct: just consider the fact that there are still people who disagree with the theory of evolution in these modern times! Although there are always references to flares of insight in science, that is not common. Darwin had volumes of notes and notebooks. Kathleen Krull tells us that he was a “self-taught” naturalist and he observed everything. When patterns emerged, he created a theory. “Darwin always considered his best trait to be perseverance. He was a huge reader with a hugely open mind. He bombarded scientists all over the world with letters, firing away questions. He had a fierce dedication to getting things right.” What a model he is for our future young scientists.



The rest of this book is about the many details of Darwin’s observations along with his personal life and relationships—always looking for patterns that others never saw. What shocked me the most is Kathleen Krull’s statement that “the most hardened resistance to Darwin’s theory is in the United States where scientific literacy lags behind that of other industrialized nations. A significant percentage of Americans do not accept the theory of evolution and think that all the supporting evidence for it has been somehow faked.” That is painful to believe.

He is buried in Westminster Abbey, close to Isaac Newton.



Review – Albert Einstein (March 14, 1879 to April 18, 1955)

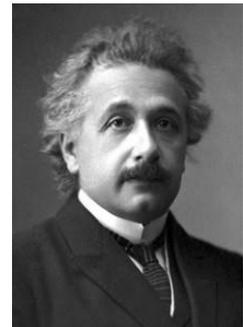
(2009) Albert Einstein by Kathleen Krull
Viking Publishing Hardcover, \$15.99, 141 pp, ISBN 978-0-670-06332-1

Reviewed by [Elaine S. Weiner](#)

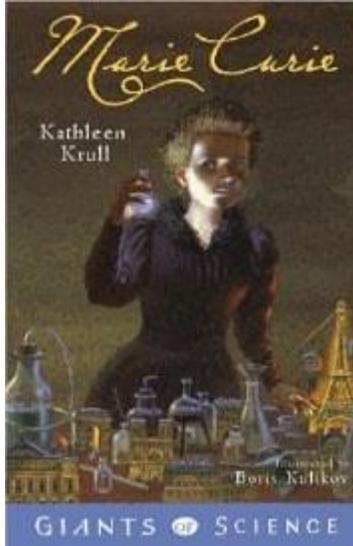
April 18, 1955. It was the day after my birthday; I was 18. The newspaper printed a view from outer space looking down upon our earth that had a large sign covering the planet with the words “Einstein lived here!” Many books have been written about Dr. Albert Einstein, but there is nothing as delicious as a biography written for young children, especially when it is written by Kathleen Krull and illustrated by Boris Kulikov. They are an elegant team that writes and illustrates brilliantly. This young person’s biography is edgy; and the word “edgy” fits Einstein’s personality with all his quirks. The author immediately captures a child’s interest on the first page: “Albert Einstein had major bedhead. His hair looked as though he’d stuck a finger in an electrical socket. Besides being fashion-challenged, he had problems with school, women, money, memory, and day-to-day day life.” We are so used to thinking of Albert Einstein as a scientific genius that we sometimes forget that such genius has many thought on other matters not related to his field. We might be surprised to know that Albert Einstein was not at all introspective. He did NOT admire psychoanalysis. He said, “It may not always be helpful to delve into the subconscious... I should very much like to remain in the darkness.” He was no fan of Sigmund Freud!

Kathleen Krull, the author, gives us additional insight into this great man’s mind: “Although Einstein had claimed to have no religion, he was not an atheist. As for the nature of God, Einstein said, ‘We are in the position of a little child entering a huge library filled with books in many languages. The child dimly suspects a mysterious order in the arrangement of the books but doesn’t know what it is. That, it seems to me, is the attitude of even the most intelligent human being toward God.’ ”

By the time Albert Einstein came to America in 1930 because of terrible anti-Semitism in Germany, he was treated as a star in the United States. However, the anti-Semitism followed him—even in America. He seemed to cope with this, and perhaps one of his maxims was motivated by those experiences: “The difference between genius and stupidity is [that] genius has its limits.”



He was a professor at Princeton with a princely salary. He lived—finally— a free and happy life, although his opinion of America was blunt: “...a boring and barren society where frivolous, shallow people seize on ‘anything that might provide ammunition in the struggle against boredom.’ ” But he also loved America’s freedoms, “believing that without freedom, there was no creativity in science or anything else...” Einstein lived and worked at Princeton for his final twenty years. Although this book is written for 10 year olds or older, I would buy many copies and share them with adults and children. It is really a mini-masterpiece.



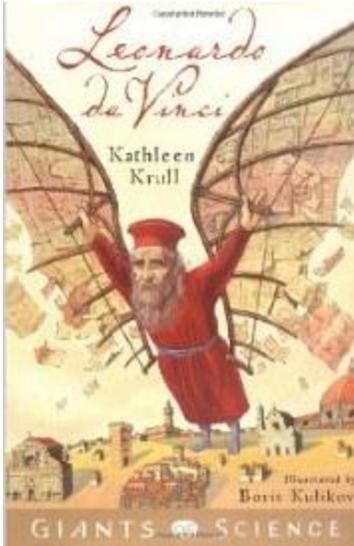
Review – Marie Curie (November 7, 1867 to July 4, 1934)

(2007) Marie Curie by Kathleen Krull
Viking Publishing Hardcover, \$15.99, 142pp, ISBN 978-0-670-05894-5

Reviewed by [Elaine S. Weiner](#)

“She risked her life for science. That much is undeniable. Yet the myth of the selfless Marie Curie—always with a saintly halo over her head—is far less fascinating than the complex life she did live.” Another in the series of *Giants of Science* captures our interest immediately. That is due to the wonderful writing style of Kathleen Krull and the exquisite drawings of Boris Kulikov, and although the books in this series are written for children 10 and up, any adult would enjoy this book as much as our children do. Marie Curie discovered radium and polonium, “two new elements that cannot be broken down any further by chemical means.” The discovery of radium was a more valuable element because radioactive rays can treat cancer and also created the field of atomic physics. The word “genius” is often used too easily. In the case of Marie Curie, however, it is more than accurate to call her a genius. She married Pierre Curie, a gifted scientist in his own right, who sacrificed his own research to help Marie with hers. She won the Nobel Prize twice, for Physics with her husband Pierre, and then, independently, for Chemistry. Irene Joliot-Curie, her older daughter, was awarded a Nobel Prize as well in 1935. And her younger daughter, Eve, wrote a biography about her parents. Because Eve was never exposed to radiation, she lived to 102. The genes simply sparkle in this gifted family. Kathleen Krull tells us that Marie Curie “was a woman men threatened to fight duels over, someone so passionate about science that she used nine exclamation points to indicate an experiment going well, a person who dreaded publicity and yet was chased by paparazzi... Her life story involved... death threats, séances, nail-biting competition... great losses, and especially a fierce struggle against the strictures of nineteenth-century society. All her life she dealt with ‘No Girls Allowed’ signs—they were everywhere.” The rest of the book tells about all the struggles she survived and the constant use of radium that eventually took her life at 66 of Leukemia and the life of her husband, Pierre, at 46 of a street accident. Of all the things she experienced, the fact that she suffered more because she was a woman was her worst frustration. She focused so clearly about the science she knew and the science she was creating that she simply barreled her way into the scientific community. By the time she died, she was a celebrity, but only after years of struggling and fighting for her rights as a scientist.





Review – Leonardo da Vinci (April 15, 1452 to May 2, 1519)

(2005) Leonardo da Vinci by Kathleen Krull
Viking Publishing Hardcover, \$15.99, 128 pp, ISBN 0-670-05920-X

Reviewed by [Elaine S. Weiner](#)

“Where do scientists’ brilliant ideas and discoveries come from? Well, nobody lives in a vacuum, and ideas don’t come out of nowhere. Even Isaac Newton (a giant of science if there ever was one) depended on what great thinkers before him had figured out in order to ‘see further,’ to make discoveries of his own.” Thus starts this biography, with the same kind of “grabber-lines” that immediately capture young readers of Kathleen Krull’s other biographies. (And they immediately grab my attention as an adult.) Boris Kulikov’s detailed black and white drawings are pieces of art

that should hang on someone’s walls as well as illustrate these books. No books, no bathrooms, no soap, no underwear, no utensils, few teeth—such was the life of the poor in the Middle Ages. Life was far better for the rich, although I am sure that not one of us would want to live in the dark ages even if we could be rich. And so, in the midst of all this dreariness came Leonardo da Vinci, born in 1452 in Florence, Italy in the Renaissance era. Da Vinci’s ability to see created a burning desire to know. He questioned everything, and we now call it the “scientific” method. Leonardo da Vinci’s childhood was terrible. He was not allowed many privileges because a child was ostracized for his parent’s errors. He was apprenticed to a variety of artisans over the years, but regardless of what tasks he was given, his mind always sought out solutions. “He wrote out rules for good health: ‘Visits to the toilet should not be postponed. Eat only when hungry and let fare suffice. Chew your food well...’ ” These beliefs were hundreds of years ahead of his time. His logic cut through superstition and the normal thinking of the day. Imagine! He was a vegetarian long before such beliefs even existed. The rest of this biography details all of Leonardo’s thoughts, drawings, notebooks, devices, and while he was creating every second of his life, most of the time he was at the mercy of those who had power over him. He was 67 when he died, and the world has not seen another mind like his.



Author: Elaine S. Wiener is Associate Editor for Book Reviews for the *Gifted Education Communicator*. In the past she has also written a column for the Communicator and articles for other journals while proofreading, her favorite activity, for all the journals that come into her scrutiny. She is retired from the Garden Grove Unified School District GATE program and can be reached at 17elaine@att.net.