The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life Short Guide

The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life by Sid Fleischman

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Overview

The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life is a fascinating account of how a writer of children's books trained himself to produce the effects that hold his readers' attention. It is a brief autobiography presenting Fleischman as a character as interesting as any the reader will find in his many books, with the same infectious humor that has made him outstanding. As a humorist, he can be compared to Mark Twain, although he does not claim to have ever attained the literary status of America's premier comic writer.

Twain's wife would sometimes call her husband "youth." There was always something boyish in the way he looked at life.

This quality can be seen in Fleischman as well. His angle of vision brings a fresh way of seeing what goes on around him and an awareness of the absurdities and incongruities of human behavior. In his later years, Twain was obsessed by the flaws he saw in humans. There is none of this acrimony in Fleischman. People amuse him, but he does not feel they are hopeless. An enjoyment of life characterizes everything he has written and is very evident in his autobiography. Early in life Fleischman was determined to be a magician. He describes his progress from his first card tricks to his professional life on the vaudeville circuit.

This was during the Great Depression and his tours took him from California to the Midwest and gave him the opportunity of seeing and, equally important, listening to many people. He decided to become a professional writer later in the 1930s and went to college with this aim in mind. During World War II he served in the Pacific Fleet of the U.S. Navy. He and his fellow sailors, officers and all, initially seemed totally inept. They soon learned basic seafaring. Their small, poorly armed vessel, in contrast to the giants of the fleet, was a subject of humor. Once out of the service, Fleischman tried a number of ways of entering the writer's profession. He was a writer of detective fiction, a reporter on two newspapers, and a screenwriter. In all of these the unexpected happened. For example, while shooting a film based on one of his scripts, Blood Alley, the crew created so much fog that the foghorns on San Francisco Bay opened up and drowned out the actors.

Fleischman is adept in providing the historical background for the seventy-odd years of his life: the Great Depression, World War II, and developments in the publishing industry as he struggled to make his living as a writer. As a news reporter and screenwriter, he learned first hand what was required in those professions. This multifaceted career is covered in a book that is guaranteed to be a popular nonfiction addition to Fleischman's long list of award-winning books.

Fleischman became a writer of humorous children's stories almost by accident; he "backed into it," as he puts it. He found that his talents and his outlook meshed completely in this type of writing. The books following Mr. Mysterious gave him ample opportunity to create unexpected situations and characters that gave him as much pleasure as the ones he has met during his long life.

About the Author

Albert Sidney Fleischman was born in Brooklyn, New York, on March 16, 1920, but grew up in San Diego, California.

In his autobiography only some of his father's activities are described in those years when the family lived in New York.

Fleischman's father, originally named Rivven, anglicized to Reuben, was born in a shabby Ukrainian village named Olik. He never knew the exact day and year of his birth, as the family, in its poverty, had no calendars. To escape service in the Russian army, a wretched life of hazings and beatings, Rivven and his father paid Ukrainian smugglers to get them out of the country.

They took an immigrant ship out of Hamburg bound for New York. Most of the male Fleischmans were either tailors or pressmen.

Sid himself was the first in many generations who could not baste a hem. Reuben quickly adopted the name Louie in New York. He was the type of person called "luftmenschen," or men of air, "impractical dreamers who necessarily mastered a dozen trades to keep afloat." He worked as a tailor in the sweatshops until, tiring of the ten- and twelve-hour workdays, he bought a taxicab. After selling the taxi, he opened a notions and ribbon shop, which failed soon afterwards. His move to San Diego proved to be a good one. He began a shop on Fifth Avenue catering to sailors' needs. Even during the Depression, sailors had income, and the naval base made San Diego more prosperous than most American cities at the time.

Fleischman's mother also came from a family of immigrant tailors. A bright girl, she was forced to leave school in the sixth grade and operate a sewing machine in a factory making ladies' shirtwaist dresses.

She met Louie when she visited his notions and ribbon store. She was working in a ladies' hat shop by that time. She would later help support her family during the Depression years by her winnings as a card player. Her skill at cards may have been part of her inheritance to her magician son.

Sid was only two when his father sent railway tickets so his family could join him in San Diego. As a child Fleischman was a "recalcitrant reader," although certain books such as Robin Hood became a favorite for a year or so. His father was a natural storyteller who knew how to get the best dramatic effects from the stories he told his children. His mother, Sadie (Solomon) Fleischman, read such books as Aesop's Fables and Uncle Tom's Cabin to her son. He says that for a time he nurtured an intense hatred for Simon Legree. During his childhood, Fleischman became hooked on magic when his dad gave him a nickel to attend a magic show which was performed in a vacant store next to his father's tailor shop.

"Someone else could be president of the United States. I wanted to be a magician."

He scoured the libraries of San Diego for books on the subject of magic tricks. He became sufficiently skilled to join the San Diego Magicians Club while still a teenager. At sixteen he and his friend Buddy Ryan teamed up as the "Ryan Brothers" one summer to tour the Sierras and the Lake Tahoe region with their acts.

Sid became the first male Fleischman to graduate from high school, and then joined the Francisco Spook and Magic Show to tour the Midwest. At nineteen he wrote a book, Between Cocktails, on how to perform magic tricks. It was published in 1939 and is still in print.

In January 1940 Fleischman reluctantly left the touring magic show to enroll at San Francisco State College. By this time he was interested in how to become a writer. He soon learned that "Writing fiction wasn't taught." He hit the library stacks again for books on story writing techniques, but maintained: "I wasn't exactly finding what I wanted."

After reading Prescott's The Conquest of Mexico, he went to Mexico to climb Aztec pyramids. There he met his future wife, Betty Taylor, a Spanish major at San Francisco State. Two days after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7,1941, Fleischman, who was in the Naval Reserve, was called up to serve. He skipped boot camp after the Navy learned he was a skilled typist. On January 25, 1942, he and Betty were married in Yuma, Arizona, then moved to New York where Fleischman worked at the U. S. Naval Recruiting Station. He sold a story to Liberty Magazine for $250. Although he continued to write all through World War II, this would be his last sale until after the war.

By the time Fleischman was ordered south to Norfolk in early 1944, he had become bored with handling enlistment papers for naval recruits. Betty found work in the Norfolk area while Fleischman waited for his ship, which had been detained at the Brooklyn Naval Yard. He and his group were finally sent north to pick up the USS Albert T. Harris. A shakedown cruise followed, which landed them in Bermuda by Christmas 1944. The Albert T. Harris, an escort vessel, was sent to the Pacific, where it took part in two invasions at Bora Bora and Borneo. Fleischman loved being at sea, despite missing his wife. After the surrender of Japan, the ship was ordered to Shanghai, China. The city, he said, "turned me into a novelist." He would later write five suspense novels with the Far East as a setting.

After he and Betty returned to San Diego following his release from the Navy, Fleischman decided to become a freelance writer, rather than finish his degree at San Diego State College. But, in eighteen months his earnings as a writer totaled 470 dollars, and he decided to go back to college on the GI Bill. He was twenty-nine years old when he graduated.

Originally hired as a copy boy on the San Diego Daily Journal, he worked his way up to becoming a reporter, a job that lasted until the paper went out of business. He and

some colleagues founded a weekly newspaper, The Point, but lacked the business sense to make their paper profitable.

During the 1950s until the early 1960s Sid Fleischman wrote detective and mystery stories for such paperback publishers as Gold Medal and Ace. One of these novels, Blood Alley, was bought by John Wayne's production company, Batjac, and Fleischman was offered a job writing the screenplay by the well-known director, William "Wild Bill" Wellman. Working with Wellman was "a graduate course in fiction writing" for Fleischman. Blood Alley became a major motion picture.

While still a screenwriter, Fleischman wrote his first piece of humorous writing for children, Mr. Mysterious and Company.

Published in 1962, the book was written to amuse his own children, Jane, Paul, and Anne. "I had wandered into the field of children's books," he said in his Newbery Medal acceptance speech. "It was as if I had found myself and I didn't know I had been lost." He enjoys both the writing of the books and the response he gets from his young readers. While few adult readers actually write to authors about their books, young adults are not in the least inhibited.

Fleischman spends part of each year touring high schools so he can interact more directly with his audience, since he regards his writing, in a sense, as another performance of magic tricks.

Fleischman's humorous stories have won him critical acclaim from the beginning. He brings to them an ingenious wit and a writing style at once sophisticated but well suited to his audience. Mr. Mysterious and Company won the New York Herald Tribune Spring Book Award in 1962. By the Great Horn Spoon!, Fleischman's second humorous book, won the Western Writers of America Spur Award in 1964, the Southern California Council on Literature for Children and Young People Award in 1964, and the Boys' Clubs of America Award in the same year. He was given the Commonwealth Club of California Juvenile Book Award in 1966 for Chancy and the Grand Rascal. McBroom Tells the Truth won the Lewis Carroll Shelf Award in 1969. McBroom the Rainmaker, was chosen as a Society of Children's Book Writers Golden Kite Award honor book in 1974. Humbug Mountain was a National Book Award finalist in 1979, and also won the Boston Globe-Horn Book Award.

The Whipping Boy, a book Fleischman worked on at intervals for nearly ten years, was the John Newbery Medal winner in 1987.

Setting

Fleischman's autobiography has many settings. San Diego is the place where he spent his childhood and adolescence. After he becomes a skilled magician, he tours the Sierras and other parts of California. The Francisco Spook and Magic Show takes him to Nebraska, Missouri and others Midwestern states, and they go as far north as Chicago and Michigan.

Fleischman's naval career took him to New York City, then to Norfolk, Virginia, to the Brooklyn Naval Yard, Bermuda, and finally to the Pacific, where he saw the Galapagos Islands en route to the ship's assigned destination. The USS Albert T. Harris was sent to Bora Bora in the Society Islands. The crew took part in the invasion of Borneo, a very brief battle which was over by noon on the day it began. Next they patrolled the San Bernardino Strait in the Philippines where in August they learned that Japan had surrendered after atomic bombs had been dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. For Fleischman the most interesting experience of his career in the war, quite possibly, was the three-week visit his ship made to Shanghai, which he felt made a profound impact on his career, turning him into a novelist. The Japanese had herded the Jewish refugees into a shabby ghetto across Soochow Creek in Hongkew.

Blood Alley was a narrow bar-lined street in this district; the name fascinated him, and he would use it later as the title of a novel.

While working on screenplays, Fleischman moved to a house in Santa Monica, where he still lives. From here he travels each year around the country to visit high school audiences.

Social Sensitivity

Fleischman's autobiography tells the story of an immigrant Jewish family during the early twentieth century. The years of the Great Depression, vaudeville during its last years, and life aboard one of the smaller World War II naval ships are of historical interest. The publishing scene from the 1940s onward is treated insightfully.

Anti-Semitism does not seem to have been prevalent in the San Francisco of his youth. But Fleischman recalls that Henry Ford's blatant dislike of Jews caused Louie Fleischman to refuse even to ride in a Ford.

The national hero, Charles Lindbergh, came on the radio in the 1940s blaming all of the problems in Europe on the British and the Jews. It upset Fleischman and his family that a man of this stature could so readily accept such claptrap.

Literary Qualities

Fleischman, like all highly competent writers, works hard to produce a style that meets his high, professional standards.

When he was younger, he would often write whole chapters in a day; now he regards a paragraph a good day's work. In college he tried to write sentences in imitation of Henry James. Writing these sentences was too much like "pulling taffy," so he began using Ernest Hemingway's deceptively simple style as a model instead.

Since fiction writing wasn't part of the curriculum when Fleischman attended San Diego State College, he went to the library stacks as he had when he was a student of magic. But the existing books on story writing were not exactly what he felt he needed.

The books did not tell him how to make a plot. "The trouble is every time you write page one you face a new wild set of variables." He gradually learned to let the material for his plots assume the natural patterns his imagination mapped out for him.

Details were important. Working with William Wellman also taught Fleischman the value of allowing a story to unfold in a series of dramatic scenes. Wellman, with an Academy Award film, Wings, in his list of successful films, which also included A Star Is Born and Oxbow Incident, had "a superb and subtle mind for story." Fleischman has stated: "I learned for a lifetime that details accumulate and no detail is unimportant."

Wellman insisted that every scene end with a strong curtain line, which became an effective writing habit for Fleischman's novels. His chapters typically end with a dramatic flourish.

Fleischman's autobiography shows how his experiences have become fictionalized in his novels. A typhoon his ship weathered in the Pacific appears as a storm off Cape Horn in By the Great Horn Spoon!; his panning for gold in the Sierras during his high school days helped him understand the lives of the forty-niners in the same book. A writer stores in his memory events and characters he can use later. Fleischman's first book, Mr Mysterious and Company, about a magician and his family, draws upon the years the author spent performing tricks to mystify audiences in California and across the Midwest.

The Abracadabra Kid gives an interesting account of how Fleischman revived the tall tale in his McBroom series. The genre had been characteristic of the frontier, but was moribund in this century. Fleischman's mentor in magic, Professor Fait, told him a story. Fait had been trying to paddle a canoe, but it kept throwing him. This was because he had parted his hair on the right.

Once he had parted his hair in the middle he could proceed with no difficulty. Remembering this tale later, Fleischman says that McBroom seemed to leap out of his typewriter at him.

Fleischman's Iowa farmer Josh McBroom is a master of the tall tale, that very American type of humor. McBroom, his eleven children, and their amazing one-acre farm have become Fleischman's best-known creations. He has written nine other books featuring McBroom, since writing the first yarn, McBroom Tells the Truth, in 1966.

Fleishman uses his life in the navy as a source of humor. His ship, the USS Albert T. Harris, was loaded with sophisticated equipment to hunt submarines, but at the outset of their shakedown cruise, "the officers and men were out of Gilbert and Sullivan."

Scarcely any of them had been to sea before.

Everybody was seasick and "hung over the rails like sailors in a comedy skit." Armed only with five-inch guns fore and aft, the ship, while participating in invasions, was firing popguns in contrast to the tremendous fire power of the battleships and cruisers. "I'm sure we hit a couple of coconut trees at least." Fleischman is skilled in using the comedy of the unexpected and the incongruous.

Themes and Characters

Fleischman's interest in performing magic tricks was the major focus of his early years.

He became adept in handling cards and other standard props. He began to learn that human beings enjoy being deceived during these performances, and that they are very susceptible in many ways. This susceptibility would be proven when, while publishing a weekly newspaper, he and his friend thought they were perpetrating a harmless hoax by reporting the discovery of a twenty-seven-inch extraterrestrial man.

The story was taken for absolute truth by many readers and received nationwide publicity.

The primary theme of The Abracadabra Kid is the process by which a writer is formed. Fleischman wants to acquire with words a skill comparable to that which he had developed in his magic.

An autobiography focuses on the character of its author. Fleischman shows how he became an astute observer of the world around him. He listens intently to speech patterns, to the expressions of the people in Missouri and Nebraska, for example, in contrast to the voices he hears in California.

He learns at first hand how Americans in many parts of the country talk. A very amiable person, he is fond of the people he meets, especially children and young adults.

Fleischman gives much credit to his teachers, the magicians who helped him master sleight-of-hand techniques and the ones who impressed him during his school years from grade school to college. Harry Snyder, whose troop performed at the first magic show Fleischman had seen, became a friend and a mentor, as did Professor Fait, the chief per former at the San Diego Magicians Club.

Harry Jones, a high school English teacher, introduced Fleischman to Shakespeare in a class that had the students playing roles in The Taming of the Shrew. Dr. Adams at San Diego State College helped Fleischman develop a sensitivity to nuance and the pleasures of the right word. "He taught me to read all over again." William Brunner, whose short story course he took after returning to San Diego State during the postwar years, taught him to realize that only through persistent practice could he master the craft of writing. While this constant practice is going on, Brunner remarked, "There's nothing wasted but the paper."

Topics for Discussion

1. What in your opinion is the most interesting period in Sid Fleischman's life?

2. Fleischman never mentions the Holocaust in this book although he must have had relatives in Europe affected by it. Why is this?

3. Fleischman stopped being a professional magician and became a writer. Does he bring a sort of magic to his novels? How?

4. What did Fleischman learn by listening to the speech patterns of the Midwest?

Is an ear for speech patterns absolutely necessary for a novelist?

5. In the 1950s we were told that only American colleges and universities attempted to teach their students their own language. Would Fleischman have found freshman English more profitable today than he did in the late 1930s?

6. Fleischman, despite the fact that he missed his wife and his family, seems to have enjoyed his life in the U.S.

Navy. Was he at all typical of many men during World War II in the services?

7. What qualities enabled Fleischman, after only three weeks in Shanghai, to use his visit as the basis of five books?

8. After writing detective and adventure novels and screenplays, Fleischman became a very accomplished author of children's books. Having read The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life, can you see why he made this choice of a profession?

9. Considering the tips Fleischman gives to writers in this book and the twelve suggestions he includes in the chapter entitled "Footsteps," is his book a valuable manual for a would-be author?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Fleischman devotes the early part of his autobiography to the process by which he became a magician. Have the more noted magicians of our time, David Copperfield, for example, undergone similar training? Are they different in any way from the ones who were on the vaudeville circuit in the 1920s and 1930s?

2. Compare Fleischman's tall stories to those of Mark Twain and other writers of the nineteenth century. Is he their equal in the creation of these stories?

3. Bill Goldfarb of John Wayne's production company, Batjac, tells Fleischman: "You write so visually, so cinematically.. .." How does the author accomplish this? Was the talent an asset for a writer of children's books?

4. Paul Fleischman won the Newbery Medal a few years after his dad. Compare their styles of writing. Are they similar?

5. Fleischman says that his novel, By the Great Horn Spoon!, is used in California's public schools in history courses dealing with the Gold Rush. What does this novel contribute to the history of the era? Compare it with a textbook account of California history.

For Further Reference

Burns, Mary M. Review of The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life. Horn Book Magazine (November-December 1996). Finds that while Fleischman in his autobiography provides the humor expected of him, he is also a writer who takes his craft very seriously. He treats his setbacks in a comic fashion, but his basic optimism may be a reason for his popularity and this outlook makes his biography accessible and invigorating.

Fleischman, Paul. "Sid Fleischman." Horn Book Magazine (July-August 1987): 42932. In this article, Fleischman's son, Paul, comments appreciatively about his father, both as parent and author.

Fleischman, Albert Sidney. "Laughter and Children's Literature." Horn Book Magazine (October 1976): 465-70. Fleischman feels that good, humorous children's literature is rare, and that humorous stories should be rated as highly as more serious literature. The child sees much that is ridiculous in his surroundings and is quick to comment on it.

Fleischman, Albert Sidney. "Newbery Acceptance Speech." Horn Book Magazine (July-August 1987): 423-28. The author describes his career briefly, and the origin and development of The Whipping Boy on which he worked for almost ten years. Chapter 41 in The Abracadabra Kid tells us how elated he was when he learned that he was a winner. He also says that he had thought of this piece of writing at first as a picture book, but the book came to life only after he realized that he needed the full scope of a novel to successfully deal with this material.

Hearne, Betsy. Review of The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life. Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (September 11,1996): 11. Maintains that Fleischman's professional touch is as obvious in his autobiography as in his fiction. He makes a classic boy's book of his story.

Hearne, Betsy. Review of The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life. New York Times Book Review (November 10, 1996): 46. Points out that Fleischman is as adept in creating fictional illusions as in his sleight-ofhand tricks. We learn how he taught himself to master both arts. He uses snappy episodes with dramatic flourishes at the end of each chapter.

Phelan, Carolyn. Review of The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life. Booklist (September 1, 1996): 126. Appreciative review stating that Fleischman's lively and readable style and his varied and intriguing life are two advantages that contribute to an interesting book. "From cover to cover a treat."

Related Titles

Louie Fleischman was part of that great influx of immigrants who entered the country during the first decade of this century.

He was one of approximately two million Jews who had left Europe since 1880. Irving Howe's World of Our Fathers is a fascinating history of these people and their customs.

Most of them, like the Fleischmans, came from eastern Europe. Once outside of the shtetls of Russia, they tended to be less orthodox in their religious beliefs. Readers will have noticed that Sid Fleischman never mentions religion. Howe's book stresses the cultural and political issues which most concerned these people.

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