The Life and Death of Crazy Horse Short Guide

The Life and Death of Crazy Horse by Russell Freedman

Contents

Overview

This book is not only a biography of the most famous of all Sioux warriors and leaders but documents a history of a people, the Lakota Sioux. As the United States expanded westward on the Oregon Trail during the latter part of the nineteenth century, the presence of ranchers, miners, and soldiers to protect them, changed the Indians' way of life. As a member of the Oglalas, one of seven tribes of the Teton or Lakota Sioux, Crazy Horse represented the Indians who wished to maintain their own way of life on their hunting grounds but were labeled "hostiles" by U.S soldiers, miners and ranchers.

Because much of the specifics regarding Crazy Horse's life were not recorded until fifty years after his death, when two women traveled the Indian lands to interview friends and relatives, Freedman had to find a way to fill in the missing gaps. He successfully provides information from his research about the typical life of a young Sioux boy as he grows to manhood to help develop a credible persona. Details about child-rearing, buffalo hunts, Vision Quests, courtship, and tribal competitions appear at appropriate points in Freedman's account.

Authentic drawings by a band historian, who was also a relative of Crazy Horse, aid the truthful depiction. Maps help to establish Crazy Horse Country, United States expansion and key battle strategies in relationship to present day boundaries. Even the jacket cover illustration provides a portrait of Crazy Horse, prepared for battle, and indicates his solitary stance that is not desirous of warrior glory or recognition.

About the Author

From an early age Russell Bruce Freedman was surrounded by books and knew he wanted to write. After several professional writing experiences, he turned to authoring books for children and young adults, which have been recognized with the highest honors, including a Newbery Medal.

Born in San Francisco on October 11, 1929, to parents Louis Freedman, a sales manager for Macmillan Publishing Company, and Irene Gordon Freedman, an actress, he was accustomed to discussing books. His family entertained such authors as John Steinbeck, William Saroyan and John Masefield.

Freedman attended San Jose State College before graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1951. Soon after he was drafted into the army and sent to Korea from 1951 to 1953. Upon returning to California, Freedman worked as a reporter and editor for the Associated Press, a job that he credits with improving his writing.

In 1956 he moved to New York to become a television publicity writer.

Freedman has written more than twenty books about animal behavior, although he is most recognized for his photobiographies.

His books about history present the facts behind the mythical legends about famous people and events. After thorough research, Freedman creates a portrait of the person with the body of facts he has collected.

Much of his time is spent in research not only in libraries but also on-site. He has watched cowboys at work, spent three days on a rattlesnake farm and visited the important sites of Abraham Lincoln's life from the log cabin birthplace to Washington, D.C.

That Freedman considers himself a storyteller first and foremost may have contributed to his being one of the few authors to receive Newbery Medal recognition from the American Library Association for nonfiction work. Lincoln: A Photobiography, published in 1987, was the first nonfiction book in thirty years to receive the Medal. He has followed it with two Honor books—The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane in 1992 and Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery in 1994. Freedman's body of work and its contribution to the field of literature for children and young adults was recognized by the American Library Association in 1998 when he received the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award.

In his article "Bring 'Em Back: Writing History and Biography for Young People" (1994) Freedman writes about his craft: As a writer of nonfiction, I have a pact with the reader to stick to the facts, to be as factually accurate as human frailty will allow. What I write is based on research, on the documented historical record. And yet, there are certain

storytelling techniques that I can use without straying from the straight and narrow path of factual accuracy.

One of Freedman's favorite quotes is by another nonfiction writer, John McPhee, who says, "Whatever you're writing, your motive is always to tell a good story while you're sitting around the cave, in front of the fire, before going out to club another mastodon." Recognizing the importance of stories from all cultures, including those who did not practice recording of important events by written word, probably helped Freedman create this book. Crazy Horse was known to tell hero stories to the tribe's children, as they gathered around his feet. Through his use of what he labels "vivid word pictures," Freedman also presents true stories to be remembered and shared.

Setting

Sometime between 1838 and 1845 a young Sioux boy called Curly was born at an encampment on Rapid Creek. Located near the Black Hills in present-day South Dakota, the boy would learn he was near sacred land that the Sioux called Paha Sapa. Not only did this land provide Indians with particular needs much of the year, but they also believed that it was home to Wakantanka, the Great Mystery, the spiritual force that exists in every form of life. This boy would grow to be the warrior Crazy Horse, who best represents the Indians' resistance to western expansion by the United States that threatened their way of life.

During his boyhood, Curly would spend most of the year north of the Platte River.

During the summer, his family stayed near Fort Laramie, in present day Wyoming, where they traded with white settlers. Present at what is known as the Grattan Massacre, where the first U.S soldier was killed and the leader Conquering Bear was mor tally wounded, the teenaged boy soon sought his Vision Quest. Although he was involved in several more interactions with soldiers and miners throughout the area, it was not until a battle with the Arapaho at the foothills of the Rocky Mountains that his father passed on the name Crazy Horse.

As miners and ranchers pushed westward, more soldiers appeared. From 1866 through 1868 Crazy Horse led raids against U.S. forts along the Bozemon Trail, established by the U.S. as a route to gold in Montana, which directly cut through hunting grounds. Once the reservations were established, the Powder River hunting grounds became the designated site for the Indians to maintain their way of life, a guarantee provided in the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1868. Powder River country is where Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull led the Indians who wished to live their traditional way of life rather than stay on the reservations, called Agencies.

Occasional but more frequent scuffles continued until they climaxed when General Custer led attempts to overtake a group at Little Bighorn, in present day Montana, where they were camping. Custer's defeat, the largest ever between U.S. Soldiers and Indians, became known as the Battle of the Little Bighorn and enraged U.S. citizens supportive of western expansion, who demanded greater control and insisted that all Indians be placed on reservations.

After one misunderstood attempt to surrender and several later skirmishes, Crazy Horse surrendered on May 6,1877 at Camp Robinson, the Red Cloud Agency, in present day Nebraska. Resented by the reservation's Indian leadership and frustrated by the whites' pressure to go to Washington, D.C., or lead attacks against other rebel groups, Crazy Horse fled during late summer to Spotted Tail Agency. There a guard mortally wounded Crazy Horse in a violent mishap on September 5.

Social Sensitivity

When discussing Native Americans, one must consider the differences in tribes, which varied in customs and language. Not only does Freedman present the culture of the Oglalas, he also shares the traits and interactions of their closest tribal alliances and enemies.

Freedman objectively presents the negotiations between the Indian tribes and the representatives of the United States government. In allowing us to see so much of the Indian's way of life, we may better understand how difficult it was for them to communicate effectively given the language barrier and cultural differences. Not only were there distinct cultural barriers between whites and Indians, but various tribal interactions required sign language and recognition of various customs. The leaders were accustomed to dealing with differences, but looked for commonalties. Negotiations with the Euro-Americans presented new barriers, however.

Establishing boundaries on a map seemed ludicrous to Indians, who moved their homes according to food sources, particularly buffalo herds, and seasonal weather patterns. Furthermore, the belief in Wakantanka established that the land could not be owned, but must be respected. That the United States wanted them to choose one head chief to speak for all of them was unfathomable because the tribal chiefs were considered equals in sharing authority. Beyond that, they could not make demands of their people, rather they advised them.

Even after the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 both sides felt the other acted in bad faith, which led to various skirmishes. Although the treaty specifically stated that Sioux hunting ground rights would continue and they should have the Black Hills "so long as the grass shall grow and the waters flow," new demands continued to appear.

Informal practices by the government were to urge tribes onto the Agencies, where they could not only be provided with food and shelter but also be monitored and controlled. Prompted by newspaper reporting and public outrage, Custer's defeat provided an opportunity for the government to impose an ultimatum that all tribes must move to the Agencies or be considered hostile. Crazy Horse's resistance, thus, represents the last remaining Indians fully living their traditional way of life, without government intervention.

Literary Qualities

As a biographer, Freedman attempts to characterize the person behind the myths, legends and exaggerations by uncovering the facts of various famous people. Instead of focusing on their famous moments, Freedman shares as much about their daily lives to help characterize them. After garnering numerous awards, Freedman is recognized as a leading writer of photobiographies for young people.

That many facts were not recorded in English until fifty years after Crazy Horse's death posed a potential problem for Freedman; however, he continues this thread of symbolic representation present in the style of the band historian's work, by sharing detailed descriptions of a typical childhood, training to be a warrior, buffalo hunts, and Vision Quests. Freedman describes such passages as "vivid word pictures." By adding such small details he is able to distinguish Crazy Horse from his peers, who all saw their way of life change dramatically as traders, miners and ranchers moved through and onto their hunting grounds.

Perhaps his attempts to create such word pictures allowed him to recognize how including the artwork of Amos Bad Heart Bull could enhance the readers' understanding, much like the photographs do in his earlier biographies. That Crazy Horse was never photographed, largely because he resisted, might have posed a problem for Freedman, unlike his biographies of more frequently photographed American presidents and the Wright brothers. By including reproductions of the drawings by Amos Bad Heart Bull, a band historian and a cousin to Crazy Horse, we gain an understanding of not only the individual but also the entire Sioux tribe.

Themes and Characters

As a youngster, Crazy Horse was known as Curly, referring to his unusual curly light hair. He would not receive his adult name until he performed a memorable deed as a youth. The Oglala people also called him "our strange one" because his physical features were different from most Oglalas and he did not abide by most customs. For example, he did not dance, sing, or take on the warriors' common practices of wearing full body paint, taking scalps and boasting.

His courtship of Black Buffalo Woman was disappointing, and he did not marry Black Shawl until both were well past the common age for marrying.

The Crow, his tribe's enemies, believed that Crazy Horse had a magical gun that hit whatever it looked at and made him bulletproof. Most likely this belief developed not only from his brave battle deeds but also after the details of his Vision Quest passed by word of mouth. After witnessing the attack on Conquering Bear's group that left the leader mortally wounded and the first U.S. solider dead in battle with the Indians, Crazy Horse saw his vision of a rider on horseback who provided very specific instructions about how he should fight. While the rider spoke in the dream, he remained unscathed by continual attacks, even by his own people, who reached out to pull him off his horse.

After proving his worth in battle, Crazy Horse, or Tasunke Witko, was given both his father and grandfather's name. It means "holy, mystical or inspired horse." His father held a respected position as a holy man, both a dreamer and a prophet, and he believed that Crazy Horse's dream indicated that he would become a leader with special powers.

Although he was known as quiet and solitary, Crazy Horse enjoyed children, to whom he would tell stories and coach sports, including trapping small animals, making a bow, and taming a horse. Certainly he maintained freedom above all else, but he was not initially disdainful of all white men. He enjoyed the trading times at Ft.

Laramie and even befriended a white man who wanted to know the Sioux better, Caspar Collins—an army lieutenant at the Fort. Eventually, however, they would appear on opposite sides in battle, where Collins was killed.

Crazy Horse experienced great personal loss. His mother died when he was young.

He witnessed the mortal wounding of the leader Conquering Bear and many innocent people. This incident prompted his Vision Quest. During a foolish war party against the Shoshoni, he lost his best friend.

Hump was his kola, so they had pledged to protect each other and share equally. His only daughter died of cholera in 1874. His brother Little Hawk was killed when miners shot at a group returning from a hunting party. A young girl he saved from one brutal attack by soldiers when everyone else was killed or fled, was killed in a later soldier

attack on a group preparing to move to a government Agency. Overall, Crazy Horse recognized that no matter how much the Indians gave up and agreed to, the white men later returned demanding more.

One of the most relevant facts about Crazy Horse is that, unlike most tribal leaders, he never "touched the pen" to establish an agreement with the United States. Perhaps one of Freedman's most memorable lines describes Crazy Horse's anger, knowing that "in the eyes of the whites, he and his people had .. . become outlaws in their own land."

Misunderstood communication between Indians and white settlers caused many skirmishes. Repeatedly Freedman accounts for particular actions referring to the belief in Wakantanka, or The Great Mystery, the spiritual force that exists in every form of life. The white negotiators' lack of understanding presented difficulties in communicating. Another indicator of a clash between cultures is the difference in proper names that the Indians and the white settlers had. Whereas the white settlers named their forts and other places after people who staked some claim to the land, the Indians more often used physical description of the land's form. Even though the Indians had traded peacefully with settlers for many years, after the Fort Laramie Treaty of 1851 the Indians referred to the pioneers' Oregon Trail as the "Holy Road" because they had to stay away from all white travelers.

Not only does Freedman thoroughly characterize Crazy Horse; he also presents sketches of other leaders, such as Sitting Bull, Red Cloud, Spotted Tail and Conquering Bear. He also thoroughly establishes the personalities of U.S. soldiers who led skirmishes, including John L. Grattan, General William Harney, General George Crook, General William Tecumseh Sherman, and General George Custer.

One of the most interesting portrayals is the change in Red Cloud, who as a leader initially resisted the white man's advance.

After visiting Washington, D.C., in 1870, however, he recognized that the traditional way of life was vanishing and that resistance would be futile. By the time Crazy Horse surrendered, Red Cloud felt that Crazy Horse's resistance had increased hardships on his people, and Red Cloud may have been partially responsible for setting up the ill feelings about Crazy Horse's presence on the Red Cloud Agency. Because Red Cloud considered himself the Oglala leader, he seemed to fear the leadership role the people gave Crazy Horse.

Topics for Discussion

1. Why do you think Freedman decided to include a list of "The Main Characters" at the beginning of the book?

2. Why are the drawings by Amos Bad Heart Bull important?

3. As Freedman describes him, Crazy Horse was a loner, who would oftentimes hunt or go off alone. How did this need for solitude affect his life?

4. In what ways might have personal tragedy influenced Crazy Horse's decisions about fighting against encroachment by the United States?

5. How does Crazy Horse exemplify the spirit of his people?

6. What qualities made Crazy Horse such a famous leader?

7. How did the belief in Wakantanka, or the Great Mystery, influence Indian's resistance to the United States' western expansion?

8. How did the Indians and U.S. government officials interpret the terms of the treaty differently? Why?

9. How did misunderstandings in communication affect Indian/United States relationships? In talks? In battles?

10. How did the Indians' fighting between tribes differ from their fighting against the United States government and the emigrants?

11. In 1991, Congress and then-President George Bush approved a Public Law that renamed the Custer Battlefield National Monument as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. Why is this name change significant?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. How did Crazy Horse's Vision Quest affect the rest of his life?

2. Compare and contrast Crazy Horse's leadership style to that of one of the other chiefs, such as Sitting Bull or Red Cloud, who made different decisions from him at key points.

3. Every person has at least one character flaw, or personal failure. What was Crazy Horse's?

4. Sitting Bull ended up leaving the U.S. and going to Canada, where he felt the people showed Indians more respect for their way of life. As they expanded, how did the two nations differ in relating to the various Indian tribes?

5. Freedman notes that the U.S. soldiers and leaders thought that Crazy Horse would become a successful peacetime leader. Do you think he could have?

6. If he had not been frustrated by pressure to take on an unwanted leadership role, would Crazy Horse have been content on the reservation?

7. The founding fathers of the United States of America established certain inalienable rights for the people. Were the Indians granted those rights when they moved onto the government land reservations and provided rations, etc.?

8. How does life on the reservations today compare to Crazy Horse's time?

9. The country of Israel was established for those who held similar beliefs, the Jewish faith. How is this different from the Agencies or reservations established by the United States government for the various Native American tribes?

10. Trace the history of Public Law 102-201, 102nd Congress, which renamed Custer Battlefield National Monument in Montana as Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument and set up a plan to construct and maintain a memorial to recognize the Indians who fought to preserve their land and culture. Have these efforts helped people understand what happened? Has it helped Native Americans living today?

11. Should people or companies selling a product (such as a beverages, food, cards, etc.) be allowed to use a famous person's name to create an image?

For Further Reference

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"Indian Memorial at Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument." At http://www.nps.gov/libi/indmem.htm. Presents the reorganizing focus of the National Park Service's emphasis of this national landmark to formally recognize all battle participants, in response to Public Law 102-201.

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Related Titles/Adaptations

Freedman has chronicled the last days of a number of groups practicing their traditional way of life, including cowboys and Native Americans. Instead of romanticizing the cowboy's way of life in Cowboys of the Wild West, he presents their daily hardships and struggles. To better understand various Native American notions of leadership and tribal differences, read Indian Chiefs, which presents the lives and important decisions of six tribal chiefs. Buffalo Hunt provides greater details of how the Indians relied upon these animals. Together these books present an understanding of western expansion of the United States during the nineteenth century.

Other biographies by Freedman have been about less controversial individuals.

The mythical qualities surrounding each of them, however, presented a challenge for Freedman to portray the persons in not only their finest moments, but their ordinary, daily times as well. Crazy Horse is unique in that so little of his life was recorded in English. Rather Freedman had to rely on recorded interviews and illustrated histories of the Indian bands.

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