

# Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life Short Guide

## Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life by Russell Freedman

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## Overview

A biography by Russell Freedman is always more than just a story of one person's life. Freedman details Martha Graham's creative as well as her chronological life. He carefully portrays both the cost and the rewards of genius. Readers finish Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life with a feeling for the evolution of dance in America and the cultural forces which determined it. The photographs Freedman includes offer readers a visual image of the artist, complimenting the written portrait the author develops in his text.

## About the Author

Notable among Russell Freedman's many honors are the 1988 Newbery Medal for *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, the first nonfiction book awarded this distinction, and Newbery Honor citations for *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* (1992) and *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery* (1993). In 1998, he was given the Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal by the American Library Association for his contributions to children's literature.

Russell Bruce Freedman was born on October 11, 1929, the son of Louis N. Freedman (a sales representative for MacMillan Publishing Company) and Irene Gordon Freedman (an actress). He attended San Jose State College (now University) from 1947 to 1949 and the University of California, Berkeley, earning his Bachelor of Arts degree in 1951. He served in Korea in the Army's Counter Intelligence Corps from 1951 to 1953. He worked from 1953 to 1956 for the Associated Press as reporter and editor, from 1956 to 1961 for an advertising company, and for Columbia University Press from 1961 to 1963.

Though he acknowledges his writing skills were honed in these journalistic endeavors, Freedman found his real destiny in the field of children's nonfiction. Reading that Louis Braille was only sixteen when he invented the Braille alphabet and typewriter, Freedman researched other significant contributions made by the young.

Braille, along with Sam Colt, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Wernher von Braun, Toscanini, Lafayette, Babe Didrikson Zaharias, and Galileo comprised Freedman's first book, *Teenagers Who Made History*, (1961). *Two Thousand Years of Space Travel* (1963) and *Jules Verne: Portrait of a Prophet* (1965) followed.

Freedman then became interested in animal behavior. From 1969's *How Animals Learn* to 1985's *Sharks*, he won acclaim for explaining complex scientific concepts simply and understandably in nearly two dozen books. His trademark integration of photographs with the book's narrative developed during this time.

In the 1980s Freeman's interest ventured beyond the animal kingdom. *Immigrant Kids* (1980), *Children of the Wild West* (1983), and *Cowboys of the Wild West* (1985) were lauded for their accurate portrayal of subjects in both the East and West.

His *Lincoln: A Photobiography* followed in 1987, winning distinction for its meticulous and balanced portrayal of the sixteenth president. Since then, Freedman has continued developing his photobiographies, publishing *Franklin Delano Roosevelt* (1990), *The Wright Brothers: How They Invented the Airplane* (1991), *Eleanor Roosevelt: A Life of Discovery* (1993), *Out of Darkness: The Story of Louis Braille* (1997), *Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life* (1998), and *Babe Didrikson Zaharias* (1999).

The drama of the West continues in his books *Indian Chiefs* (1987), *Buffalo Hunt* (1988), *An Indian Winter* (1992), and *The Life and Death of Crazy Horse* (1996).

Freedman took a look at early twentieth-century children in *Kids at Work: Lewis Hine and the Crusade against Child Labor* (1994).

Freedman has found his destiny, writing for children. He says, "A writer of books for children has an impact on readers' minds and imaginations that very few writers for adults can match."

## Setting

The world Martha Graham was born into was too small and too tight for her. She grew up during Victorian times which restricted an individual's expression, and imposed strict behavioral rules. For a revolutionary dancer, the determination to express her dance had to be strong in order to break free of the confines of strong approval and disapproval.

Martha Graham seeks out places which were most conducive to her vision. When the repetitive nature of the exotic dances she was performing in Ruth St. Denis's company and the Greenwich Village Follies in New York City became too confining, Graham fashioned her own environment.

In her dance studio Graham is free to create her innovations. On the stage, Graham is free to express them. These two settings are important in the life of Martha Graham.

Freedman describes Graham sitting on the floor, sewing costumes and instructing her students in executing "contractions" and pushing down on the floor to give strength to their movements. Using description and quotations of eyewitnesses, and remarkable photographs, Freedman puts Graham on stage so that the reader can see the grief, the pioneer spirit, and the passion which Graham personified. As Graham invents modern dance, she embellishes the bare stage with men, with scenery which is itself nearly a work of art, with the spoken word, and with music written especially for dance.

Freedman painstakingly chronicles Graham as she evolves as dancer, company director, and choreographer in the only setting Graham wanted, "The Theater of Martha Graham." Once a critical success in New York City, the rest of the geographic world is Graham's for the taking.

## Social Sensitivity

Martha Graham's life spanned nearly a century. The world Martha Graham was born into was too small and too tight for her. Freedman gives the reader a history lesson in Victorian attitudes. Children were expected to sit up straight and wait for adults to direct them. Though George Graham was a loving man, he still was a Victorian father whose approval or disapproval would have impacted Martha's determination to study dance.

Absorbed in her own work, Graham was little affected by major events in society.

But young readers receive a mini lesson in the Nazi persecution of the Jews, the 1936 Olympics, and a glimpse of the censorship which attempted to stifle the avant guard.

But seeing them for what they are—prejudice and tyranny—Graham distances herself and her dance company from them.

The dance world Graham revolutionized had been determined by the geometric patterns and narrow, prescribed positions of the body. Ballet feet were tightly bound in order to perform that most unnatural feat of balancing enpointe, that is, on the tips of a woman's toes, to tell fluffy, decorative stories. In contrast, Graham's passions were as bare as the feet with which she danced. Her dances explored feelings and conflicts of the "interior landscape." "I did not dance the way that other people danced," she once said. "In many ways I showed onstage what most people came to the theater to avoid."

Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life can be read on several levels. It can be seen as the retelling of one woman's life. It can also be viewed as a chronicle of the cost and the reward of actuating a great ambition. Or it can be considered a history of the evolution of modern dance.

## Literary Qualities

Freedman draws on nearly forty references to construct his portrait of Martha Graham. The details he uses from these sources create an intricate picture of Graham's life. Freedman's descriptions of Graham as a child quickly allow young readers to identify with her. What little girl has not played dress up with her mother's "junk jewelry" or made a theater curtain with a bed sheet like Graham did?

Likewise, Freedman's attention to minutiae captures the world around Graham.

The Victorian era of Graham's childhood is perfectly explained by Freedman's comment that little girls were expected to wear "spotless white gloves when they went to church."

His use of quotations from critics, admirers, friends, lovers, and even Graham herself creates an immediacy that also draws both the young adult or mature reader into Graham's life, into her rehearsal studio, and on to the performance stage. Dancing in "Frontier," during the period Graham expressed what being an American was to her, she smiles. Walter Terry writes, "I was there, and it was the most ravishing smile I have ever seen in my life."

Freedman's biography provides balance, including both the praise and the criticism her early work and her later dancing received. He mentions, but does not belabor, her bouts of alcoholism and depression.





# Themes and Characters

Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life holds important messages for all readers about realizing their ambitions. Once she had seen Ruth St. Denis dance, Graham had found her destiny. She is determined to achieve it at the cost of any obstacle in her way.

She began her training late for a dancer.

She was not physically attractive and her body shape and size (a mere five foot, two inches) did not fit into traditional dance norms. However, these physical limitations did not deter her single-mindedness about becoming a dancer. Freedman includes Graham's early financial troubles which forced to her to borrow money from her mentor and lover Louis Horst, make her own clothes, and become a vegetarian. Her fiery temperament incinerates anything—even friendships—that might interfere with her life's work. She purposefully avoids bearing children. "I couldn't control being a dancer," she said. "I knew I had to choose between a child and dance, and I chose dance."

Freedman also shows the dark side of genius. As a perfectionist, she is harsh, demanding, disciplined, and driven. Graham insults those who have offended her; she tears costumes that do not meet her standards; she scraps dances that do not satisfy her. In a furious display of temper, she rips a telephone from the wall and later yanks a tablecloth from a table, sending silverware and glassware to the floor.

Graham had intense personal relationships with Louis Horst and Erick Hawkins.

Horst, who played the piano for her first audition, is both lover and mentor to the dancer. Freedman quotes Horst saying, "I gave her discipline. I was the tail to her kite, because she was a wild one... I was her thread to earth." He loans her money, gives her advice, and provides a sounding board for her ideas. Their relationship spans three decades before an argument over one of Graham's dances causes him to walk out.

Bringing dancer Erick Hawkins into her allfemale company allows Graham to expand the emotions and themes on the stage. Passionately in love with him, Graham eventually marries Hawkins. Agnes de Mille says "He was the man for her." But the marriage between the two fiery artists collapses when Hawkins belittles Graham's dancing. There was little room on the stage for any one else when Martha Graham stood in the spotlight.

The only thing Graham could not dominate by the force of her will was age. Graham reluctantly adapts in order to stay near dance. Hampered by arthritis, she nonetheless reinvents herself from dancer to company director to choreographer.

As a woman and as a dancer, she provoked her audience beyond the pretty stories of classical ballet. John Martin wrote, "Audiences who come to be amused and entertained will go away disappointed, for Miss Graham's programs are alive with passion and protest. She does the unforgivable thing for a dancer to do—she makes you think."



After "The Three Gopi Maidens," "Maid with the Flaxen Hair," and "Clair de Lune" which reviewers labeled "decorative" and "undisturbing," Graham's dances began to embrace social protest and the strong human passions of ordinary people. She speaks against war, reveals fears of the young, embodies grief, and condemns intolerance.

Graham tells in story form the life of Emily Dickinson and Charlotte Bronte, strong and independent women like herself who found the interior world gratifying.

Freedman includes chapters on the new language of movement Graham invents and describes the process in which Graham creates a dance—from her initial inspiration through rehearsal and scenery design to performance. No reader leaves this biography of Graham's life without realizing the rigors of the creative process.

# Topics for Discussion

1. How did Martha Graham's ideas of dance differ from the traditions of classical ballet?
2. Part of Graham's success came from surrounding herself with supportive associates. What did Louis Horst, Erick Hawkins, Isamu Noguchi, and Ron Protas contribute to her development as a dancer/creator?
3. Genius is said to be one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration. Give examples of Graham's sacrifices in building her dance company.
4. What aspects of her personality as a child and young girl marked the certainty that she was destined to pioneer a new way of dancing?
5. Discuss how the themes in Graham's dances shifted focus over her long career. Cite examples.
6. Women had just earned the right to vote as Graham began her critical success as a dancer. In what ways would she be considered a feminist in today's society?
7. What things did Martha Graham give up that you would not be willing to sacrifice to reach your own ambitions.

Explain why.

8. Cite ways Graham adapted to accommodate the limitations age imposed on her ability to dance.

# Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Ruth St. Denis and Isadora Duncan were forerunners in the modern dance.

How did their styles depart from the established dance of the time?

2. Paul Taylor and Merce Cunningham were students of Martha Graham. Discover how they departed from her teaching, creating distinctive styles of their own.

3. Who is Aaron Copland? Research and listen to the music he composed. What common ground do you think he and Graham shared? Why would he and Graham have collaborated so well?

4. Congressmen objected to the use of federal funds to help support "Phaedra."

How does the National Council for the Endowment of the Arts function today? Research recent instances where federal funding of art has become controversial.

5. New expressions of art often cause controversy among the public. Investigate the current definitions and boundaries of art and how it can be distinguished from the profane and obscene.

6. Compare and contrast Freedman's account of Graham's life with Graham's autobiography, *Blood Memory*.

7. Without limiting yourself to the world of dance, pick a pioneer or tradition breaker. Research that person's life, seeing if any common qualities exist with Martha Graham.

8. What issues and themes are dominant in modern dance at present? Is Graham's once ground breaking style and technique still performed on stage?

9. Create a time line recording the accomplishments in Martha Graham's life.



## For Further Reference

Giblin, James Cross. "Freedman, Russell."

Horn Book (July-August, 2000): 473. Giblin quotes Russell about his philosophy of writing, about writing for children, and the influence of photographs in aspects of his career.

Horning, Kathleen T. Review of Author Talk: Conversations with Judy Blume, Bruce Brooks, Karen Cushman, Russell Freedman, Lee Bennett Hopkins, James How, Johanna Hurwitz, E. L. Konigsburg, Lois Lowry ... Horn Book (July-August, 2000): 473. Horning praises author Leonard S. Marcus for focusing the conversations with authors on the creative process. She also likes the way Marcus questions the authors from the standpoint of an adult researcher asking questions children would not think to ask but would be interested in learning the answers.

Review of Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life.

Publishers Weekly (April 6, 1998): 80. Freedman is praised for his balanced view of the genius/artist, gleaned from exhaustive sources.

Rochman, Hazel. Review of Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life. Booklist (April 1, 1998): 1324. Rochman appreciates this first Freedman book about an artist and Freedman's efforts to focus on Graham's creation of a modern dance language.

The reviewer finds that Freedman's descriptions lead naturally to photographs.

Striggles, Theodore W. Review of Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life. New York Times Book Review (May 17, 1998): 29. While Striggles gently complains Freedman could have made more of Graham's legendary temper and bouts with alcoholism and depression, he praises him for the "fine introduction" the book gives to readers about an icon of modern dance.

Zvirin, Stephanie. Review of Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life. Booklist (June 1 & 15, 1998): 1716. Martha Graham is included in Booklist's "Crossover" selections because it appeals to both young readers and adults. Zvirin praises Freedman's books as "speaking eloquently" about Graham's personal life and including "electrifying photographs."

## Related Titles

In his annotated bibliography, Freedman lists nearly forty sources about and by Martha Graham which he used for *Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life*. These include other books about her, books about dance, magazine and newspaper articles, and film references.

*The Life and Dances of Martha Graham* by Trudy Garfunkel, *Frontiers of Dance: The Life of Martha Graham* by Terry Walter, and *The Importance of Martha Graham* by Pamela Pratt are books specifically written for young people. Freedman book's, however, is written in a manner appealing to older readers as well as young ones.

Fellow dancer Agnes De Mille wrote *Martha: The Life and Work of Martha Graham*.

Herself a colorful figure of dance, De Mille provides an insider's view of her friend of sixty years. Don McDonah's *Martha Graham: A Biography* was published two years after her death and is described by Freedman as "the most carefully documented biography of Graham."

Martha Graham's autobiography, *Blood Memory*, includes material not found in other biographies. Graham's version of her life reconfirms what analyses and photographs catch: the scope of a great talent and the confidence it inspires.

Those interested in investigating the scope of modern dance might use Jack Anderson's *Ballet and Modern Dance: A Concise History* or Joseph H. Mazo's *Prime Movers: The Makers of Modern Dance in America* as starting points in their search for information about famous dancers.



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## Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Editor

Kirk H. Beetz, Ph.D.

Cover Design

Amanda Mott

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction

Includes bibliographical references and index

Summary: A multi-volume compilation of analytical essays on and study activities for the works of authors of popular fiction. Includes biography data, publishing history, and resources for the author of each analyzed work.

ISBN 0-933833-41-5 (Volumes 1-3, Biography Series)

ISBN 0-933833-42-3 (Volumes 1-8, Analyses Series)

ISBN 0-933833-38-5 (Entire set, 11 volumes)

1. Popular literature—Bio-bibliography. 2. Fiction—19th century—Bio-bibliography. 3. Fiction—20th century—Bio-bibliography. I. Beetz, Kirk H., 1952-

Z6514.P7B43 1996[PN56.P55]809.3—dc20 96-20771 CIP

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Printed in the United States of America First Printing, November 1996