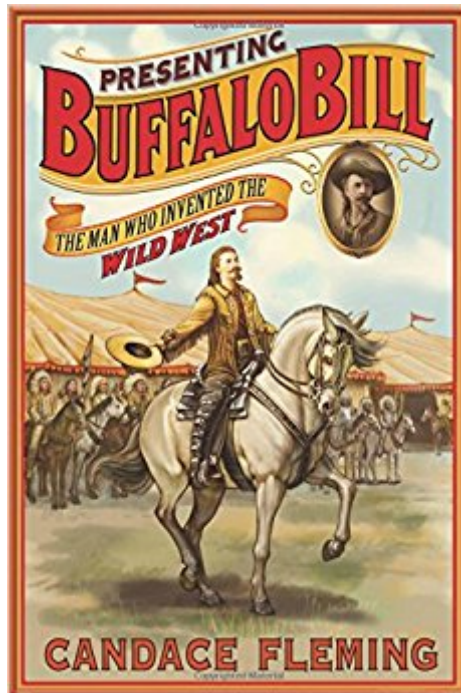




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# Presenting Buffalo Bill: The Man Who Invented The Wild West



## Synopsis

Everyone knows the name Buffalo Bill, but few these days know what he did or, in some cases, didn't do. Was he a Pony Express rider? Did he serve Custer at the Battle of Little Big Horn? Did he scalp countless Native Americans, or did he defend their rights? This, the first significant biography of Buffalo Bill Cody for younger readers in many years, explains it all. With copious archival illustrations and a handsome design, *Presenting Buffalo Bill* makes the great showman come alive for new generations. Extensive back matter, bibliography, and source notes complete the package. This title has Common Core connections.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Gr 7 Up "Fleming captivates readers from beginning to end with her biography of William F. Cody (aka Buffalo Bill). Cody cultivated an image, and throughout the text, Fleming deftly integrates what Cody said about himself alongside existing historical evidence. She relies on photographs, show memorabilia, and drawings to emphasize the scale of Cody's shows, relay the depths to which he would go to promote himself, and demonstrate how these pieces of history may not be accurate. Cody's shortcomings are laid bare, and Fleming addresses the criticism Cody faced for how American Indians were portrayed in his shows. She details the atrocities committed by the U.S. government against many Native tribes, too. In a beginning author's note, Fleming states that, whenever possible, she has identified American Indians as members of specific tribes. She also considers how terms like Native American, Native performer, and Indian will appear in context.

However, the term warrior is often used to describe specific American Indians, and in a discussion of the Congress of Rough Riders of the World, the text refers to the Russian Cossacks, Argentine gauchos, English and German cavalrymen, and Syrian riders as "colorful and exotic horsemen." In addition, librarians should be aware that the work does feature stories of violence against American Indians, specifically the retelling of Cody's scalping of Yellow Hair "a potentially upsetting scene. VERDICT An informative examination of Buffalo Bill and his legacy for the middle and high school set, and to be handled with care." Hilary Witt, Sullivan University, Lexington, KY

"Fleming's even-handed biography of William Cody, the "hardscrabble frontiersman who became America's legendary showman," is more than just the story of a larger-than-life figure." •Publisher's Weekly, starred review "Fans of Fleming's The Family Romanov (BCCB 9/14) may marvel at the abrupt bounce from Russian Revolution to Wild West, but those who appreciate her authorial craftsmanship will recognize that she makes each of these great stories a window into countless others." •Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, starred review "Fleming begins each chapter with a scene from the "Wild West" show, using the theatrical production to introduce a time period in Cody's life, which, unadorned, is still fascinating as this man with a hardscrabble childhood makes and loses several fortunes over his lifetime." •The Horn Book, starred review "A thoroughly engaging portrait of a fascinating, larger-than-life figure." •Kirkus Reviews "An illuminating look at an American legend." •Booklist

Candace Fleming has once again written an absolutely compelling biography. She has chosen a man who lived an interesting life, if not devoid of conflict and controversy. It can be challenging knowing how to handle such controversies as those that swirl around Buffalo Bill Cody. In my opinion, Fleming has done a superb job of sharing stories and experiences while still highlighting problems that have been found with the stories Cody told about his own life. Memoirs can be problematic to begin with since all the stories in them are told from that person's point of view and not necessarily from a factually accurate standpoint. Buffalo Bill was especially well-known for exaggerating the stories he told, even in his autobiographies. And some of his stories seem to be fiction altogether seeing as they contradict what others have recorded and what the historical record reveals. But using the stories that can be verified from Cody's perspective as well as the words of family members and other witnesses, Fleming has still managed to create an incredibly compelling biography of a complex individual. There were times as I read that I liked Buffalo Bill and times when I did not. Buffalo Bill definitely made his share of bad choices in his life and was very much

human. The legends that surround Cody are pushed aside and the reader is given a chance to see him as a man of the times, a man with a gift for storytelling, but who felt little if any guilt at exaggerating or inventing accomplishments. He was the consummate showman who was willing to hire both women and Native Americans for his show at a time when few did. Fleming doesn't shy away from the questions about whether Cody manipulated and used the Native performers but she puts the questions in context which I really appreciated. All in all, Fleming has created the kind of biography that I especially enjoy, one that shows the real person, flaws and all.

I'm a big fan of Candace Fleming's biographies, especially her books on Eleanor Roosevelt and Ben Franklin. This book isn't presented in the same scrapbook-style, but I found it incredibly informative, balanced, and well-written. A wonderful read!

My son loved reading this. Very interesting life of Buffalo Bill Cody!

Xmas gift for our almost 14 year old grandtwins. They loved it.

I've been thinking a lot lately about how we present history to our kids. Specifically I was thinking about picture book biographies and whether or not they're capable of offering a nuanced perspective on a person's complicated life. Will we ever see an honest picture book biography of Nixon, for example? In talking with a nonfiction author for children the other day, she asked me about middle grade books (books written for 9-12 year olds) and whether or not they are ever capable of featuring complicated subjects. I responded that often they're capable of showing all kinds of sides to a person. Consider Laura Amy Schlitz's delightful *The Hero Schliemann* or Candace Fleming's *The Great and Only Barnum*. Great books about so-so people. And Candace Fleming's *Presenting Buffalo Bill* is now there's an author clearly drawn to historical characters with slippery slidey morals. Her latest book, *Presenting Buffalo Bill* is a splendid example of precisely that. Not quite a shyster, but by no means possessing a soul as pure as unblemished snow, had you asked me, prior to my reading this book, whether or not it was even possible to write a biography for children about him my answer would have been an unqualified nope. Somehow, Ms. Fleming has managed it. As tangled and thorny a life as ever you read, Fleming deftly shows how perceptions of the American West that persist to this day can all be traced to Buffalo Bill Cody. For good or for ill. What do you think of when you think of the iconic American West? Cowboys and sage? American Indians and buffalo? Whatever is popping up in your head right now, if it's

a stereotypical scene, you've Buffalo Bill Cody to thank for it. An ornery son of a reluctant abolitionist, Bill grew up in a large family in pre-Civil War Kansas. Thanks to his father's early death, Bill was expected to make money at a pretty young age. Before he knew it, he was trying his luck panning gold, learning the finer points of cowboy basics, and accompanying wagon trains. He served in the Civil War, met the love of his life, and gave tours to rich Easterners looking for adventure. It was in this way that Bill unwittingly found himself the subject of a popular paperback series, and from that he was able to parlay his fame into a stage show. That was just a hop, skip, and a jump to creating his Wild West Show. But was Bill a hero or a shyster? Did he exploit his Indian workers or offer them economic opportunities otherwise unavailable to them? Was he a caring man or a philanderer? The answer: Yes. And along the way he may have influenced how the world saw the United States of America itself. So let's get back to that earlier question of whether or not you can feature a person with questionable ethics in a biography written for children. It really all just boils down to a question of what the point of children's biographies is in the first place. Are they meant to inspire, or simply inform, or some kind of combination of both? In the case of unreliable Bill, the self-made man (I'm suddenly hearing Jerry Seinfeld's voice saying to George Costanza, "You're really made something of yourself") Candace Fleming had to wade through loads of inaccurate data produced, in many cases, by Bill himself. To combat this problem, Ms. Fleming employs a regular interstitial segment in the book called "Panning for the Truth" in which she tries to pry some grain of truth out of the bombast. If a person loves making up the story of their own life, how do you ever know what the truth is? Yet in many ways, this is the crux of Bill's story. He was a storyteller, and to prop himself up he had to, in a sense, prop up the country's belief in its own mythology. As he was an embodiment of that mythology, he had a vested interest in hyping what he believed made the United States unique. Taking that same message to other countries in the world, he propagated a myth that many still believe in today. Therefore the story of Bill isn't merely the story of one man, but of a way people think about our country. Bill was merely the vessel. The message has outlived him. I've heard folks online say of the book that they can't imagine the child who'd come in seeking a bio of Buffalo Bill. Since kids don't like cowboys like they used to, the very existence of this book in the universe puzzles them. Well, putting aside the fact that enjoying a biography often has very little to do with the fact that you already were interested in the subject (or any nonfiction book, for that matter), let's just pick apart precisely why a kid might get a lot out of reading about Bill. He was, as I have mentioned, a humbug. But he was also for more than that. He was a fascinating mix of good and evil. He took credit for terrible deeds but

also participated in charitable acts (whether out of a sense of obligation or mere money is a question in and of itself). He no longer fits the mold of what we consider a hero to be. He also doesn't fit the mold of a villain. So what does that leave us with? A very interesting human being and those, truth be told, make for the best biographies for kids. The fact that Bill is a subject of less than sterling personal qualities is not what makes this book as difficult as it is to write (though it doesn't help). The real problem with Bill comes right down to his relationships with American Indians. How do we in the 21st century come to terms with Bill's very white, very 19th century attitudes towards Native Americans? Fleming tackles this head on. First and foremost, she begins the book with a Note From the Author where she explains why she would use one term or another to describe the Native Americans in this book, ending with the sentence, "Always my intention when referring to people outside my own cultural heritage is to be respectful and accurate." Next, she does her research. Primary sources are key, but so is work at the McCracken Research Library at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody, Wyoming. Her work was then vetted by Dr. Jeffrey Means (Enrolled Member of the Oglala Sioux Tribe), Associate Professor of History at the University of Wyoming in the field of Native American History, amongst others. I was also very taken with the parts of the book that quote Oglala scholar Vine Deloria Jr., explaining at length why Native performers worked for Buffalo Bill and what it meant for their communities. What surprised me the most about the book was that I walked into it with the pretty clear perception that Bill was a bad man. A guy who hires American Indians to continually lose or be exploited as part of some traveling show meant to make white Americans feel superior? Yeah. Not on board with that. But as ever, the truth is far more complicated than that. Fleming delves deep not just into the inherently racist underpinnings of Bill's life, but also its contradictions. Bill hated Custer when he knew the guy and said publicly that the defeat of Custer was no massacre, yet would reenact it as part of his show, with Custer as the glorified dead hero. He would hire Native performers, pay them a living wage, and speak highly of them, yet at the same time he murdered a young Cheyenne named Yellow Hair and scalped him for his own glory. Fleming is at her best when she recounts the relationship of Bill and Sitting Bull. A photo of the two shows them standing together as equals . . . but it is obvious that Bill is leading the way while Sitting Bull appears to be giving in. What was the subtext of the photo? That the "friendship" offered in the photograph and in Wild West performances "honored American Indian dignity only at the expense of surrender to white dominance and control." I'm writing this review in the year of 2016 "a year when Donald Trump is running for President of the United States of America. It's given me a lot of food for

thought about American humbuggery. Here in the States, we've created a kind of homegrown demagoguery that lauds the successful humbug. P.T. Barnum was a part of that. Huey Long had it down. And Buffalo Bill may have been a different version of these men, but I'd say he belongs to their club. There's a thin line between a self-made man and making stuff up. Thinner still when the man in question does as much good and as much evil as Buffalo Bill Cody. Fleming walks a tightrope here and I'd say it's fair to say she doesn't fall. The sheer difficulty of the subject matter and her aplomb at handling the topic puts her on a higher plane than your average middle grade biography. Will kids seek out Buffalo Bill's story? I have no idea, but I can guarantee that for those they do they'll encounter a life and a man that they will never forget. For ages 10 and up.

This is a wonderful book, and my husband agrees! A most excellent read.

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