

Professor Abernathé's Compendium of Heroes

By

Daniel E. White July 15, 2024

Professor Abacus Abernathé published *Compendium of Heroes, Adventurers and Other Intrepid Heroes*. The book is comprised of thumbnail sketches of the lives of people like Galileo Galilei, Leonardo da Vinci and Thomas Alva Edison, "three of the greatest minds of the scientific age." In the book also are thumbnail sketches of the lives of Hercules, Theseus, and Jason, adventurers of heroic stature.

Billy Watson, age eight, has read the book 24 times. He has memorized scores of lines from the book. His older brother, Emmett, doesn't mind that Billy has read the same book so often. What gnaws at Emmett is why the Professor blended mythical heroes with real men of accomplishment in the same book.

Emmett reasons, "Galileo, da Vinci, and Edison were not heroes of legend. Those were men of flesh and blood who had the rare ability to witness natural phenomena without superstition or prejudice. They were men of industry who with patience and precision studied the inner workings of the world and having done so, turned what knowledge they'd gained in solitude toward practical discoveries in the service of mankind."

"What good could possibly come from mixing the lives of these men with stories of mythical heroes setting sail in fabled waters to battle fantastical beasts? ...By tossing them together, Abernathé was encouraging a boy to believe that the great scientific discoveries were not exactly real, and the heroes of legend not exactly imagined."

People of a Certain Age, when you were eight, who were your heroes? Were they real people, like your mom or dad or were they famous people from the past like Madame Curie, Davy Crockett, or Amelia Earhart? Or maybe athletes, like Billy Jean King or Mickey Mantle? How about Superman or Sleeping Beauty? Maybe Jason, if you knew about the Argonauts?

What was the Professor's reasoning for writing such a book? Certainly, he knew the difference between fictional figures and real humans.

Emmett allows "that shoulder to shoulder they traveled through the realms of the known and the unknown making the most of their intelligence and courage...but also of sorcery and enchantment and the occasional intervention of the gods."

Emmett concluded his lament, "Wasn't it hard enough in the course of life to distinguish between fact and fancy, between what one witnessed and what one wanted? Wasn't it that challenge of making this very distinction that had left their father, after 20 years of toil, bankrupt and bereft?"

These days, with artificial intelligence, photo-shopping, etc., making the distinction between "fact and fancy" is immeasurably harder. Emmett and Billy lived in an earlier time; even then, Emmett's worries were not unfounded.

Moment of truth: Emmett, Billy and the Professor are fictional, primary characters in Amor Towles' book, *Lincoln Highway*. As with any good literature, to take the characters at face value

without seeing the underlying message on the author's mind, reduces them to the equivalent of stick figures, marching through exciting adventures of no particular significance.

Of the three main characters, Billy changes the least as the story unfolds. Emmett learns, a lot. The Professor comes to a realization about his own life through his contact with Billy.

Underlying all is the question: what constitutes a hero, and why should we care?

Billy is a precocious eight-year-old. For him, reading the same lengthy book (with multiple chapters written for adults) 24 times is not usual. His wide-eyed excitement about heroes and their quests does ring true for a kid that age. Asking a child what she wants to be when she grows up will offer clues to her heroes and heroines even if her answer varies from month to month.

He also has the innocence of an eight-year-old. Why can't I be or do (fill in the blanks) is a probable response if you tell a child that he can't be or do this. Is it possible that, even at that young age, she sees beyond the specific physical details to understand something deeper about the hero, fictional or real?

Author Towles uses Billy to influence the life of the Professor. The Professor has written a successful book, to be sure, but comes up short when he recognizes that, in the game of life, he has been content to stay on the sidelines. Saying more would spoil the book should you decide to read it. I highly recommend it.

Those heroes and heroines we favored at age eight? My guess is that few of us actually followed in the specific footsteps of a particular person we hold in such esteem. I wanted to be the centerfielder for the New York Yankees, succeeding Mickey Mantle. Only size, speed, and talent limited me. But Mickey Mantle represented doing one's best even when that translated into only 3 1/2 hits for every 10 at bats.

Aren't our heroes and heroines representative of the aspirations we have to be as good as possible at what we do? Don't they reflect virtues such as kindness and courage, curiosity and caring?

Possibly, Emmett came to understand this; that's not clear in the book. I'm sure Towles understands.

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