

Nonfiction as a Literary Genre
A Study Guide by Chris Pepple
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Nonfiction is a literary genre that has a strong field of books and talented authors that have captivated readers for hundreds of years. Yes, nonfiction can also be a form of historical or academic writing, but it is also so much more than that. The genre encompasses a wide variety of educational writings, historical research, and coverage of current events and thoughts. But beyond the value of recording history or teaching people, many nonfiction writers also intend to entertain the reader and draw them into the book through the prose that can flow as beautifully as a well-written work of fiction.

Many nonfiction writers weave throughout their work literary techniques that are common in fictional pieces. For example, writers of both fiction and nonfiction use the idea of “show, but don’t tell” to engage the senses of the readers and give them a deeper connection to the story being told. The authors use recurrent imagery, dialogue, and vivid descriptions of the setting including textures and smells to connect with readers on multiple levels.

Literary nonfiction uses an almost poetic tone at times to bring new light to a subject that readers may not have normally been drawn to. Historical settings and people or groups of people are introduced to new audiences in very creative ways.

Literary nonfiction can be explored by students using the same critical approach they would take with fiction. Nonfiction works have a tone, a plot, point of view, a unique setting, and a list of characters. They have themes running throughout the work, and they are also packed with symbolism.

Into Thin Air
by Jon Krakauer

This book details the personal experience of a climber who experienced firsthand the tragedy on Mt. Everest in 1996. Six climbers were killed during the climb and several others were stranded and injured by a storm.

Krakauer draws the readers into the story by vividly describing the setting through each part of the journey. These descriptive sections of the book reveal one theme that runs throughout the work: the beauty and the danger of the natural world. The author shows us the conflicting aspects of nature, reminding reads that something extraordinarily beautiful can also bring extreme danger. The book also reminds the reader of the power of nature vs. the power of humans. We often think we can use our own resources and the technology we have created to tame and control nature to serve our own purposes. At times, however, nature shows her true strength and defeats every human effort to survive.

Human mortality can also be explored as another theme running through *Into Thin Air*. Krakauer explores the dangers of the sport of mountain climbing and the fatalities that occur even when all precautions are taken and the participants are trained for the task. The book also examines the question of the value of each life. Are the lives of the native climbing guides hired to do much of the challenging work to prepare for the climb just as valuable as the lives of the elite climbers and the wealthy clients who paid for the adventure?

Other themes that can be used for paper topics with this book:

- Perseverance
- Commercialization and its effects on the natural world
- The group vs. the individual (loyalty and trust among teammates)
- Survivors' guilt

Into Thin Air Essay Suggestions

1. What are some of the challenges Krakauer faced when writing this narrative about his 1996 expedition?
2. In a brief section late in the book, a team of Japanese climbers refuses to help some stranded Ladaqui climbers who were near the summit in the storm, saying that they can't "afford morality" in such dangerous conditions. Why do you think Krakauer includes this information in *Into Thin Air*? How does this relate to the overall theme of mortality?
3. Throughout *Into Thin Air* there is a constant tension between climbers struggling with following human reason vs. human ambition. How does Krakauer show this tension through the actions and decisions of the climbers?
4. Compare the theme of humans vs. nature in *Old Man and the Sea* and *Into Thin Air*.
5. Discuss the theme of classes in society as depicted in *Into Thin Air*. What is the significance of the fact that more guides than clients were lost on the mountain during the expedition?
6. Krakauer's relationship with death changes significantly from the beginning to the end of *Into Thin Air*. Trace this evolution of his thoughts and use specific examples that illustrate ways he changed how he came to view death and why the changes occurred.

Brave Companions: Portraits in History **by David McCullough**

This book contains a collection of short portraits of men and women who changed history. The essays include glimpses into the lives of Lewis and Clark, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Harry Truman, Franklin Roosevelt, Beryl Markham, Amelia Earhart, and others. McCullough reaches out to readers in hopes that we can deepen our understanding of history and see that people of the past still have a lot to teach us. The essays cover a diverse group of people and reveal their viewpoints on society, hope, and exploration as we find what inspires each individual.

Themes that can be explored by readers:

- Courage
- Individuality/Perspective of Each Person
- Human vs. Nature
- Perseverance
- Good vs. Evil
- Uses for Technology: Is Technology Always Good?
- Role of Curiosity in the Human Experience

Essay Questions

1. Why do you think McCullough chose this list of people for his collection of historical overviews? What overall message do you think the author is hoping the readers understand?
2. Compare the lives of two of the people included in this collection. How are their perspectives similar? Different?
3. How do these historically important figures still influence us today?
4. Choose one theme from above and discuss how that theme runs through three of the essays.