

Ordinary People Change the World: I Am Frida Kahlo

by Brad Meltzer, Illustrated by Christopher Eliopoulos

A Book Review by Pamela Sergey

"I am not sick. I am broken. But I am happy to be alive as long as I can paint."

"Nothing is worth more than laughter.

It is strength to laugh and to abandon oneself, to be light.

Tragedy is the most ridiculous thing."

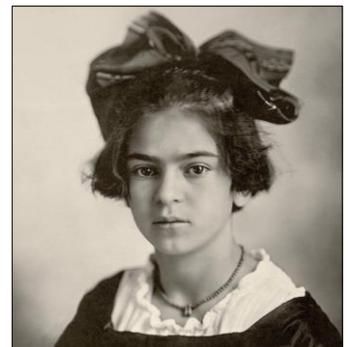
- Frida Kahlo (1)

In January 2014, Meltzer joined forces with artist Christopher Eliopoulos (from Marvel Comics) to launch a new series of children's books titled *Ordinary People Change the World*. It is a line of lively and cleverly illustrated biographies for kids showcasing the lives of American icons as children themselves. The series started with *I Am Amelia Earhart*, followed by *I Am Abraham Lincoln*, which debuted as #3 on The New York Times bestseller list in February 2014. Each book explores the champion's traits and childhood influences in an informal writing style. Young readers can apply lessons learned from the heroes lives to their own lives. In March 2021, Meltzer and Eliopoulos released *I Am Frida Kahlo*, the 23rd book in the series.

After contracting polio at age six and surviving a bus crash when she was 18, Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) made her mark in art history by transforming her own suffering into complex and colorful paintings. "*I do not know whether my paintings are Surrealist or not,*" she stated in a letter to a friend in 1952, "*but I do know that they are the frankest expression of myself.*" (2)

Polio affected Frida's right leg, making it shorter and thinner than her left.

"It all began with a horrible pain in my right leg from the muscle downward,' she remembered. 'They washed my little leg in a small tub with walnut water and small hot towels.'" (2) She would spend the next nine months in bed. Frida was a clever and creative child and to keep her occupied, a family friend gave her drawing lessons and her photographer father taught her photography and dark room techniques. Eventually she would go along with him on photo shoots and help him in the dark room. Kahlo's father also encouraged her academically, and in 1922 she was accepted into the elite National Preparatory School in Mexico City. Being one of only 35 female students, Frida intended to study medicine. It is also where she met her future husband, muralist Diego Rivera. To strengthen her weaker leg, her father got her involved in sports. Frida played soccer, boxed, wrestled, and became a champion swimmer. However, at school, she was bullied and faced discrimination. "*I knew the battlefield of suffering was reflected in my eyes. Ever since then, I started looking straight into the [camera] lens, without winking, without smiling, determined to prove I would be a good warrior until the end.*" (2)



Frida Kahlo, 1919
Source: Frida Kahlo Museum

In 1925, at the age of 18, Frida Kahlo was severely injured when the wooden bus she was riding in was struck by a streetcar, sending a steel handrail through her back and out her pelvis. The crash fractured her spinal column in 3 places, her right leg in 11, broke her collarbone, ribs, pelvis, and crushed her right foot. The additional damage to her right leg and spine would cause her lifelong problems and constant pain.



Frida painting in bed, 1940.
Source: Frida Kahlo Museum

To help pass the long hours recuperating in a body cast, Kahlo began painting again. Her father gave her his paints and brushes, and her mother set up a portable easel and installed a mirror to the underside of Frida's canopy bed so she could paint herself while laying down. She completed her first self-portrait, *Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress*, in 1926. "*I paint self portraits because I am so often alone, because I am the person I know best.*" (2) Frida

is most remembered for these self-portraits, often as manifestations of her pain. During her lifetime, she officially painted 55 self-portraits, representing roughly a third of her total artwork.

By the early 1940s, Frida would be in chronic pain from her back and right foot, unable to sit or stand for long periods of time, confined instead to her bed or a wheelchair. Over the course of her lifetime, Frida would

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wear over 25 corsets ranging from plaster and leather to steel, endure over 30 surgeries, months of bedrest. She started wearing shoes with a built-up right heel and long, traditional Mexican Tehuana dresses to conceal her lower body and to express loyalty for her Mexican culture.

Although Kahlo had solo exhibitions in New York and Paris in the late 1930s, it was not until the spring of 1953 that her first solo exhibition opened in Mexico. She was in extremely poor health at the time, and her doctors advised her not to attend. Strongminded and stubborn, she found a way to attend. Frida arrived by ambulance, her bed was brought into the gallery and she held court lying in her own bed.

1953 also marked the year that gangrene set into her right foot and her leg was amputated below the knee. In place of the hospital's standard-issue prosthetic, she designed and had one custom-made – complete with a red lace-up boot, embroidered with dragons and bells. She said, *"If I have to wear a prosthetic leg it may as well be beautiful."* (2)

The next year, July 1954, just a week after her 47th birthday, Frida was dead from a morphine overdose, probably a suicide. Written in her journal were her last words, *"I joyfully await the exit - and I hope never to return – Frida."* (1)

Kahlo was one of those stubborn people who "takes a licking and keeps on ticking", no matter what life threw her way. She treated her polio and her accident as a new beginning and started painting the world as she saw it. *"I don't paint dreams or nightmares, I paint my own reality,"* Kahlo said. *"The only thing I know is that I paint because I need to, and I paint whatever passes through my head without any other consideration."* *"Painting made my life complete. I lost three children . . . painting was a substitute. I think working is the best thing,"* she once said. (2)

Frida was only marginally successful during her life and remained undiscovered for 30 years. Her first painting to sell, *Tree of Hope-Remain Strong* (1946), sold at auction in 1977 for \$19,000. In 2016, her painting *Two Nudes in a Forest* (1939) fetched \$8 million. Vocal artist Madonna is known to admire and collect her work.

Children reading *I Am Frida Kahlo* will grasp Frida's resilience, inner strength and national pride. Her resolute defiance in the face of great pain will give them tools to become heroes in their own lifetime.

"At the end of the day, we can endure much more than we think we can." - Frida Kahlo (2)

"Don't build a wall around your own suffering - it may devour you from the inside." - Frida Kahlo (2)

The Global Polio Eradication Initiative (GPEI) declared Mexico has been declared polio-free in 1990.

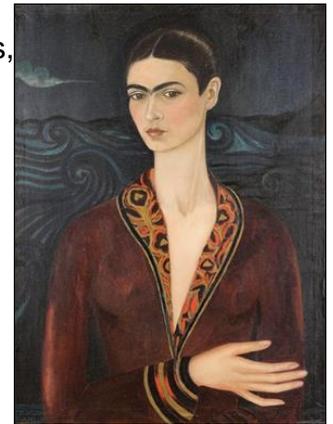
Brad Meltzer is a Brooklyn-born lawyer, an award-winning author of political espionage thrillers, non-fiction and comic books, and the host of several TV series on PBS Kids and the History Channel. Following the birth of his first child, Meltzer added non-fiction children's books to his long list of accomplishments, releasing *Heroes for My Son* in May 2010, and *Heroes for My Daughter* shortly thereafter.

Meltzer also helped locate the missing 9/11 flag raised by firefighters at Ground Zero, World Trade Center. Using his TV show, *Brad Meltzer's Lost History*, he recounted the story of the missing flag and asked viewers to help find it. Four days later, a man walked into a fire station in Everett, Washington, said that he saw Meltzer's TV show, and wanted to return the original flag. Meltzer unveiled the flag at the National September 11 Memorial & Museum in New York on the 15th anniversary, where it is now on display. (3)

Sources: (1) Frida Kahlo website <https://www.fridakahlo.org/frida-kahlo-quotes.jsp>

(2) Herrera, Hayden. *Frida: A Biography of Frida Kahlo*. New York, Harper, 1983

(3) Gustines, George Gene. "Long-Lost 9/11 Flag, an Enduring Mystery, Will Go on View at Museum". *The New York Times*, September 6, 2016



Self Portrait in a Velvet Dress - Frida Kahlo.org



Interior Page – I am Frida Kahlo