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A Conference on Nonfiction Books for Children
by Lillian Heil

"Go to a nonfiction conference? No way!! Fiction, yes--I love stories for children, but I want to forget those boring health, math and social studies books I had in school."

If this describes your reaction to the announcement of a conference on nonfiction books for children, you missed an exciting week according to some of the 90-100 participants at just such a conference. Some commented on the practicality of the sessions.

"I have a great reservoir of ideas to use."

"This conference has inspired me with many new ideas for teaching and using books."

"I learned ways to use nonfiction in addition to their use as reference materials."

"I thought as a librarian I would get help on selection, but my mind has also been opened to ways to get children excited about nonfiction books."

One particularly enjoyed the authors who spoke at the conference.

"It was enjoyable to meet some authors and see what they are really like and how hard they work in research before writing."

Some revived their excitement for teaching.

"It makes me want to go back in the classroom again."

"I can't wait to start reading nonfiction to my preschool."

A few said nonfiction books would help them personally with their own children.

"It will be a great help with my own son who has never liked fiction."

"These books will help answer questions of a very curious eight year old."

One participant was delighted to have the books right there at the conference so she could get her hands on them.

"It was so good to see the actual books and not just hear about them."

Quite a number of conferees sounded like converts to a new way of thinking. With contagious enthusiasm, they proclaimed their change of heart.

"All of a sudden nonfiction came alive!"

"I've made a complete turn-around. I can see the importance; in fact, I must use nonfiction in every part of my curriculum."

"The conference certainly dispelled any idea of mine that nonfiction was dry and boring."

"Because of this conference my whole attitude towards nonfiction has changed."

One declared her excitement by announcing a crusade (keep an eye out, she may be headed your way) to convince others of the importance of nonfiction.

"I'm going to review a nonfiction book at each faculty meeting to excite the teachers in my school."

The conference referred to was the Second Conference on Nonfiction Books for Children held at Brigham Young University June 16-20, 1986. Doctor Beverly Kobrin, with her generous supply of nonstop energy, infused enthusiasm for new books and activities to accompany them on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. In addition, Dean Hughes (Utah author) intrigued us with the similarities between fiction and nonfiction. He didn't think imagination could be disconnected from

nonfiction because "it may be the quality crucial to being human." He also reminded us that bad fiction "is as boring as dull nonfiction."

Gloria Skurzynski's slide-video presentation immersed us in the world of her latest book *Swept In a Wave of Terror* while Gerald Richards taught us intriguing facts about birds of prey as some of his winged hunters skimmed across the auditorium inches above our heads. Gus Clark reminded us of the classic Landmark Biography Series which are well on their way to being collectors' items and Lois Clark (no relation to Gus) described to us the history and construction of Kites.

Small group sessions gave participants some difficult choices to make as they deliberated which two of the following sessions would be best for them.

Magazines for Children -	Ad Spofford
Writing and Publishing -	Dawn Asay
A Reading Program -	Katie Blake
Teaching Demonstration -	Helen Schmidt
Books for Babes -	Jeannine Laughlin
Analysis of Who Writes Science Books for Children -	Dorothy Shields Marsha Broadway

On Thursday Beatrice Siegel described her quest for information about the island off Manhattan through which so many immigrants have passed--*Sam Ellis's Island*, and George Ancona shared the fun he had in Alaska helping children to create photo essays.

After a luncheon honoring our six authors and one about-to-be (that's Beverly Kobrin with her eagerly awaited book on nonfiction books and activities to try with them), Kathy Lasky regaled us with a description of how worrying and whining are essential to her writing process and then proceeded to explain the challenge of fiction for her as that of "maintaining a faithfulness to the fact which does prohibit her from letting people climb on eagles' backs to fly. The challenge of nonfiction is different. It is trying to find the story within those facts, the beauty within the process and the mystery within the known."

Our last author, Irene Brady, made us feel we were in her corner of solitude and wilderness in Talent, Oregon as her slides showed how she brings life to her animal drawings. (She also admitted to being one of the few people who has a license from the fish and game department to care for any orphaned baby skunks in the forest surrounding her home.)

The conference ended with book talks by participants that had all of us ready to start grabbing books again to see for ourselves and continue with our reading.

A few weeks later I received a phone call from a woman in Cedar City who told me she'd missed the conference and wondered if I could send her any book lists or reprinted talks. I promised to mail her some materials but decided I'd better guard against her missing the next nonfiction conference by giving her a pep talk for 1988. And the same, Dear Reader, goes for you; the third nonfiction conference will be in 1988. Jean Fritz, writer of biographies for children, will be one of the authors you will hear. Plan to attend, now!