Exciting New Nonfiction Books for Fall 1991

Lillian Heil
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by Lillian Heil

with Help and Advice from Ad Spofford

If you have avoided nonfiction books because you have thought there were borrrr-ing, not for you, too technical, or because of a fear that children only like fiction, give us a chance to change your mind with a description of nine books that could turn you on to nonfiction. We are convinced that children are already willing to devour them, but because some are too young to read, or don’t have access to new books, they may need help from you adults. Our top nine nonfiction books are from a wide range of topics: genealogy, baseball hotshots, poetry, bugs, history (of the Pilgrims and the Oregon Trail), weather, a series of books about animals, and a cookbook full of party ideas.

Ira Wolfman’s book *Do People Grow on Family Trees?* is an outstanding book because it personalizes genealogy. Instead of being only a series of steps in the process of researching your ancestors, Wolfman shows the reader that genealogy is a way to discover who the people are on your family tree. He shows how those people become real live individuals who are tremendously important to each of us—if any one of them were missing, we wouldn’t be here. Wolfman succeeds in making genealogy a process of discovering individuals because he illustrates each technical step with interesting stories of successful efforts, besides including an overview of our country’s immigration history. He tells the reasons why different nationality groups came to the United States at different times. It’s a very detailed book on how to do genealogy, but the reader never gets lost in the technical process. Any portion of it could be used alone—interviewing family members or making a family tree—or it could be used as an extended unit with each child finding his own “roots”. As a postscript, The LDS Family History Library system is given top billing as a resource, and Alex Haley gives a powerful forward recommending the book and the process it teaches.
Sports Illustrated has published a children’s book on the Hotshots of Baseball. Author Susan Sloate divided the book into early stars (Babe Ruth, Ty Cobb, and Lou Gehrig), the glory days (Joe DiMaggio, Mickey Mantle, Willie Mays, and players in New York), Black Pioneers, Brothers, Stars of the 60’s and 70’s, and Superstars of the 80’s and 90’s. Excellent black and white photographs are enhanced by a layout which makes good use of attractive frames and blocks of color. This clever use of touches of yellow, red, green, and blue gives the book a lively appearance which reflects the enthusiasm of Americans for this national past time, and invites the young reader to pick up the book. These hard-working young baseball players show what determination and skill can do on the baseball field.

Jack Prelutsky, the master of carefree, sometimes slapstick poetry, has collected poems "to tickle your funny bone" in his book, For Laughing Out Loud. There are 132 poems that will help the reader see the funny side of life starting with Prelutsky’s invitation that ends with this verse:

I wish you lots of belly laughs,
I hope you have to roar,
And if you almost split your sides,
That’s what this book is for.

Marjorie Priceman’s carefree and exuberant water colors fit the light-hearted mood of such poems as Cole’s:

I thought I'd win the spelling bee
And get right to the top,
But I started to spell "banana"
And I didn’t know when to stop.

Prelutsky’s choices cover a wide variety of funny situations, both realistic and fanciful, gentle humor and slapstick, logical and nonsensical. His final choice, by Dorothy Aldis, reminded me of laughing times with my friends:

We’ve laughed until my cheeks are tight
We’ve laughed until my stomach’s sore
If we could only stop we might
Remember what we're laughing for.

Pamela M. Hickman's *Bugwise* covers all kinds of bugs and spiders, plus a few extra "bug impostors" like centipedes, scorpions, and mites. The reader is invited to observe, collect, and study all kinds of bugs, and is given detailed information about places to go and inexpensive equipment necessary for the good bug collector. It's the first bug book I've seen that recommends returning the bug to his habitat when the study is over. (That I would have appreciated when neighbor children wanted preying mantises from my garden for their bug collections.) The black and white drawings make identification easy, and there are a multitude of interesting facts about insects and spiders, e.g. ants live longer than any other insect--8 years; in the days before insect sprays, some people kept toads indoors to control bugs; or try this as a trivia question: How many legs are on the ground at one time when an insect walks? Answer: Three (one on one side and two on the other. The other three legs are in motion.) Or: How can you collect spider webs? Answer: spray it with clear lacquer, cut the supporting strands, and catch and glue it to a piece of black paper.

Children have always been fascinated by bugs--this book by Pamela Hickman, and the Ontario Federation of Naturalists, may even get adults excited about going on a bug hike.

*My favorite editions of Treasure Island, Robin Hood and The Last of the Mohicans* were those illustrated by N. C. Wyeth. Now I find that an unfinished series of murals by N. C. Wyeth, commissioned in 1940 by Metropolitan Life in New York City, were the art chosen by author Robert San Souci to illustrate his book about the Pilgrims who landed in America in 1620. Wyeth's illustrations emphasize the beauty of Massachusetts even during that first cold, hard winter. Wyeth also conveys a sense of celebration of the good things that happened to the colonists--the courtships, weddings, peaceful contacts with the Indians, and the harvest which prompted what we now call the first Thanksgiving dinner. San Souci's text is a concise description of the background of the Pilgrims (known as Separatists in England) and how they obtained the financial backing to come to the New World. He describes some of the
problems on the voyage and of that first difficult winter when half of the Pilgrims died. Both pictures and text then turn to the pleasant things that happened to the colony, ending with the Thanksgiving feast. San Souci’s text and Wyeth’s illustrations seem a fitting celebration of an important part of the history of our Nation. That first Thanksgiving was a triumphant celebration of surviving a difficult winter of death and sickness to firmly establish a colony in a new land. The content and its vivid visual and textual presentation make this book suitable for all ages.

Amply illustrated with old drawings, maps, documents, and photographs, Leonard Everett Fisher will take you on The Oregon Trail. Fisher’s use of historic documents gives evidence of his careful research. Find out what Marcus Whitman, John Fremont, and Jim Bridger looked like. Read about the responses of the Indians who were not happy about the white people in their living space. Fisher also gives detailed information concerning the difficulties of wagon train travel and the daily routines followed on the 2,000 mile trail. Again, the visual format and interesting text would allow adults to use portions of, or all of this book with many different age levels.

Bruce McMillan’s The Weather Sky gets our vote as an outstanding book because the clear, colored photographs of 12 categories of clouds, and the weather accompanying them, can be used with grades K-3. The children can easily see the differences between various kinds of cloud formations, and you may even want to advance to information about the height of the different formations—the more technical information is right there accompanying the pictures, e.g. a simple diagram showing what kind of frontal air movement produced such clouds, plus a chart showing height in miles and feet. The narrative explains what is happening in terms of cold fronts, moist air, and dry air. Also included is the effect of the air movement and why it moves the way it does. Ad (Spofford) said he had seen a couple of reviews by meteorologists who were amazed at McMillan’s accuracy in describing weather patterns. The author’s interest in the topic (he’s visited the world’s rainiest place and the mountain where the highest wind gusts were recorded) is shown in this informative and interesting book.
Many of you may be familiar with *The Eyewitness series* because of the spectacular photographs and wealth of information, (particularly those on skeletons, rocks and minerals, birds, trees, and ponds and rivers), BUT are you aware of the 12 less expensive *Eyewitness Juniors* on animals? The information is not so overwhelming, but is no less interesting. Did you know that butterflies who drink the juice of rotten fruit get too drunk to fly, or that a lot of moths don’t eat anything--they don’t even have mouths? The accuracy of this series is verified by experts at the Museum of Natural History in London who act as consultants. The format allows for use in a large or small group with a big dominant photograph on each page surrounded by small drawings or photographs. These marvelous pictures allow the reader to see sights we seldom observe in nature like snakes swallowing eggs whole and spitting out the shell, or owl monkeys that come out only at night. The simplified text will make them easy to use with young children, but the clear, almost three dimensional pictures will make them interesting to all ages.

All these books which celebrate the world we live in may put you in the party mood. You can present Angela Wilkes’ *Party Book* to your class and it will lead children in the steps for getting ready for a party: making the invitations, the decorations, and the fancy hats, and gives a choice of food such as drinks, dips, sandwiches, cookies, and a special chocolate cake. The forward lets children know that they should check each page for equipment, materials, step-by-step instructions, and decorations and includes a picture of the final result. The author has even devised a symbol (red and white striped oven mitt) to signal children that they should ask adults for help. All of the steps are shown in actual photographs, many of them life-size, so that children can use this colorful cookbook just the way adults do--as a guide through the process of cooking.

As I come to the end of this list, I realize that I’ve been describing certain qualities on a recurring basis: All of these books are visually interesting, a fact which makes it possible to use them with multiple age groups. They are well organized so that specific information is easy to find. They are accurate so that experts in each particular area approve
of them. Last, but not least, they are each so interesting that all of the topics covered invite readers of every age to the joys of discovery.

Our wish for you is that you will have a party with these new nonfiction books. Celebrate the process of finding out about the world with the help of the new wave of informational books for children.

Bibliography


