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Birthing Pains: The New Nonfiction for Young People

By Marsha D. Broadway

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Nonfiction certainly has a bad reputation among parents, teachers, and librarians. The phrase "nonfiction for young people" conjures up remembrances of drab pages filled with stark print, dull facts, line drawings, and black and white photographs. Even authors struggle with the negative image of nonfiction. Some years ago, I heard author Jane Yolen say, "Nonfiction sounds as though it has been in a race with fiction and lost."

At the 1990 YASD Preconference, editors and authors voiced some of their frustrations at the image problem. Jeanne Vestal, senior vice-president and editorial director for Franklin Watts, noted, "There is a lack of glamour ... in nonfiction. It isn't considered a genre; it's not poetry, fiction, or picture books. It's nonfiction. I wonder if they teach any nonfiction classics in children's literature courses?"1

Author Brent Ashabranner describes the frustrating situation:

"We can't even think of a name for what we do. I mean, what is nonfiction? Look it up in the dictionary—it appears on the same page with nondescript and noneffective. . . . 'The greatest service you could render to nonfiction writers is to think of another word for it.' . . . You're off to a bad start when you have to say we're not fiction writers, we're nonfiction writers."2

Vestal is correct in assuming that nonfiction, or informational books, has until recently been largely ignored in curricula designed to train teachers and librarians. Many teachers and librarians can attest to this neglect in their own education. English critic Aidan Chambers chides that nonfiction "does get brushed off and pushed to the back . . . as though information books were socially inferior to the upper-crust stuff we call literature. The doyens of children's literature . . . have narrowed its meaning to encompass only stories, poems, and plays—the holy three."3

But nonfiction is inching its way into children's literature textbooks, inservice training, and workshops. Many authors of informational books for
young people would describe the process as a difficult labor; however, a few are gaining name recognition: for six weeks in 1988, David Macaulay's *The Way Things Work* topped the best-seller list; Russell Freedman received the 1988 Newbery Medal for *Lincoln: A Photobiography*; and Jean Fritz won the Orbis Pictus Award, established in 1989 by the National Council of Teachers of English specifically to honor works of nonfiction.

**Time for A New Name**

Unlike Vestal, I consider nonfiction to be a genre, one that should be defined by what it is and not by what it is not. I agree with Ashabranner that a revised nomenclature is needed. Besides improved terminology, we need to reclassify—or at least rethink. Part of the definition problem lies with Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC), or rather with librarians, who recognized that the fiction genre needed to be separated from the other types of literature to improve access for fiction readers. After fiction was removed from the DDC in many libraries, everything that remained was labeled "nonfiction," both creative and informational works. Instead of fiction and nonfiction, the use of creative works and informational sources would produce categories that are more unified. Within creative works would be fine arts, music, and literature. Literature would encompass oral and written creative works, including the genres of fiction, poetry, drama, short stories, folktales, jokes, riddles, and comic books. Informational sources would be factual or analytical and focus on the disciplines of knowledge, including social sciences, pure and applied sciences, language, religion, biography, geography, and history. Admittedly, this division needs refinement, but it attempts to define both categories—not just one.

Any change in terminology will occur slowly, because the change agents—authors, publishers, teachers, and librarians—are mostly resigned to the murky nomenclature that arose when novels were given a "F" or "Fic" designation in hundreds of American libraries. Although we may be undecided about the most appropriate name for nonfiction, its renaissance began in the 1980s with the delivery of a new generation of informational books for young audiences. Happily, that rebirth continues to put more and more quality books into the hands of children, parents, teachers, and librarians.

**Trends in Nonfiction for Youth**

The new informational books are filled with vivid illustrations and photographs, inviting formats, and fascinating facts to appeal to youthful curiosity. These books are making their way into elementary and secondary classrooms as teachers implement whole-language curriculums. They add vitality and promote individualized learning.
The most noticeable trend in new informational books is color. Books that compete with MTV, video games, and television must be dazzling. American publishers, recognizing the need for cost containment, send many books out of the country, notably to Singapore and Italy, for production. For less than twenty dollars, a buyer may purchase a nonfiction book with brilliant color photographs or illustrations on every page.

Along with the vivid colors, a "sound bite" format attempts to deliver the information in quick-to-digest packages, perhaps in response to the shorter attention spans of the media generation. The Eyewitness Books series pioneered this format, which allows the reader to browse through the book, picking and choosing captions and brief text to read. As in a visit to a museum, the reader may explore parts of the collection and return on another visit to investigate other items. Other informational books, especially curiosity and question/answer books, use bold headings to separate text as short as a paragraph or as long as a two-page spread. Again, these books allow the reader to choose what to read. To sample this format, try Charlotte Foltz Jones' *Mistakes That Worked*, Billy Goodman's *Natural Wonders and Disasters*, or Steven Biesty’s *Incredible Cross-sections*.

The encyclopedic, production-line writing style of the 1960s is giving way to books written by authors who wish to share their personal delight in a topic. In *Let There Be Light* and *From Hand to Mouth*, James Cross Giblin brings fascination to topics that initially appear ordinary, even boring. Milton Meltzer does the same in *The Amazing Potato*. Jean Fritz, Doreen Rappaport, and Russell Freedman bring to life heroic men and women that history textbooks often ignore. Molly Cone’s *Come Back Salmon* encourages curiosity and action, proving that young people can improve their world even when adults are doubtful.

Not all nonfiction is quality material. Much mediocrity is generated in response to curriculum needs. Some estimate that half the informational books published are the results of publishers recognizing a market and requesting an author to write a book. (Remember those assigned research papers that you didn’t have much heart to do?) These books are often as "dull as a brussels sprout," because the authors may lack enthusiasm for their work.

**Bringing Baby Home**

Most parents let nature determine their children's characteristics. As teachers and librarians, we are responsible for selecting the characteristics that are needed in the nonfiction we buy for and use with young people. With decreasing budgets for schools and libraries, we are charged with recognizing
quality informational books. Unlike parents, we choose which nonfiction "babies" we bring into our homes, classrooms, and libraries.

Through two decades of teaching, selecting materials, and asking other professionals' opinions, I have formulated guidelines to use in selecting informational books for young people. Those guidelines fall into seven categories: (1) attractiveness, (2) accuracy and authority, (3) content, (4) style and treatment, (5) illustrations, (6) arrangement, and (7) comparison.

Attractiveness. The book cover or dust jacket should be appealing. The axiom "Don't judge a book by its cover" doesn't work with young people. Most youth will not pick up a book with an uninteresting cover. Unless you are willing to booktalk and promote the title, avoid boring covers. Text crowded on a page is another turn off. An inviting balance of text and white space should exist.

Accuracy and Authority. Facts should be accurate and complete. Current information, especially in the sciences and technology, is essential. Facts, theories, and opinions should be clearly distinguished. The author should be qualified by education, experience, or research to write about a topic. Evidence of research should be documented through acknowledgements, endnotes, or bibliographies. Although some authors and publishers advise that documentation distracts young readers, evidence should exist that the author had done more than a cursory investigation.

Content. The content should be suited to the personal or educational interests of intended audience. The purpose of the book should be clear, and the vocabulary should match the reading level of the intended audience.

Style and Treatment. The prose should be compelling, drawing the reader into the topic. While satisfying curiosity, the book should encourage additional exploration or thinking. Condescending language, stereotypes, and oversimplifications should be avoided. Different points of view, particularly on controversial subjects, should be acknowledged.

Illustrations. Graphics, illustrations, and photographs should enhance and clarify the text. Sexist and racial stereotypes should not be reinforced in illustrations; however, certain conventions may be appropriately depicted. The illustrations should be appropriate for the topic, of high quality, clearly captioned, and placed close to the corresponding text.

Arrangement. The text should follow a logical sequence, easily understood by the young reader. In longer books, a table of contents, chapter titles,
headings, and indexes will help the reader access the information sought. Glossaries should be included if unfamiliar terminology warrants their use.

**Comparison.** How does this title compare to other books on the same topic? Is there a better book on the topic?

*As a librarian, I also consider the following questions:*

- What new information does this book add to the collection?
- Where does the book fit into the curriculum?
- How can it be used in the classroom and by the individual child?
- Is the book worth the cost?

Admittedly, all the guidelines will not apply to every book, but they provide a basis from which critical evaluations of informational books can be made. These guidelines can be used when the book is in hand or while reading reviews. If a reviewer omits several points of information that are important to the purchase decision, I look for another review; and a second review of a nonfiction title is more difficult to locate than one for fiction.

Compared to children's fiction, limited data about the characteristics, uses, and authors of informational sources exist. For teachers and librarians to become better informed, we need to examine the books, talk with the authors, and share our ideas for using informational books in the home, classroom, and library.

**Making Nonfiction Part of the Family**

Teachers and librarians, along with authors and publishers, are the family that must welcome and praise the birth of exciting new informational books. But can we embrace this genre with the same excitement we find in fiction? Authors and publishers of quality informational books need to be acknowledged for their labors. These books deserve to be included in bibliographies, book displays, booktalking, and classroom reading and teaching. Fiction writers are deluged with students' letters, while nonfiction authors experience drought. Fiction is most often the focus of literary awards. If the "step-child" image of informational books is to change, we must give the genre an identity that is separate from fiction, recognize its positive characteristics, and provide it the same attention we give to fiction.
6 Brigham Young University

Endnotes


2. Ibid.