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What Makes An Award Winning Informational Book?

By Lillian H. Heil

According to the Utah children who participated in the CLAU (Children’s Literature Association of Utah) Children’s Choice Award, the award winning book was one that gave children activities to do and things to manipulate as they learned about their Amazing Senses. The five hundred children (in two different schools) who took the time to explain their selection from the five nominated books clearly showed their preference for a book that actively involved them. Seventy-one children mentioned the activities and things to do. An additional 41 liked the movable or pop-up style of the book. Thirty-eight more children characterized it as “cool,” “neat,” “fun,” or “interesting.” Specific mention was made of eye tests, sign language, the Braille sample, the page on the sense of touch, the rubber band illustrating pain, and the test for quickness of reflex action. Your Amazing Senses invites readers to actually test their own senses and these children eagerly accepted that invitation.

Even more interesting to this author was the fact the children’s responses focused on the strength of each particular book. Children voted for Do Animals Dream? because they liked the way the book was organized by types of questions they’ve often had but never had answered. Twenty-five children named questions and answers as their reason for choosing it, eight simply said the questions were the reason, 12 listed specific questions that had been answered, and four said it was “cool” and “interesting.” Another 14 reasons given were their liking for animals. Joyce Pope, the information officer at the Natural History Museum in London, selected the questions used to organize information about animals from the most common ones asked by children when they visited the museum. Utah children’s votes indicate that they liked the book because it was organized in the same way that they think.

The children who chose Go In and Out the Window (a collection of old favorite songs illustrated with paintings from the Metropolitan Museum of Art) focused on the art, the music, or a combination of the two. It’s interesting that 18 mentioned the art, and 15 the music, but 26 said the art and music together made them vote for the book. Five children simply said the book was unusual or different. The team that produced this book would be pleased to know that children perceived the strength that art and music can give to each other.

African Journey was done by a young photographer and Peace Corp member whose photographic essay on Africa showed the dramatic effect different geography has on the life and work of five groups of people in Africa. Twenty-nine of the children voting for this book mentioned the pictures and the other 14 said they chose it because it told about people and about Africa and its people. Anyone reading this book is struck by the simple dignity of the men,
women, and children representing the nomads, the farm tribes, the fisher folk, the river folk, and the people living in a big city on the African continent.

Only a couple of children in the fifth and sixth grades selected Meltzer’s *The American Revolutionaries*; they liked history and one mentioned the excitement of the Boston Tea Party indicating his positive response to an eye-witness account of a famous event in our nation’s history.

The responses of these 500 children highlight the thought and planning that go into outstanding informational books. The pop-up, movable type format was an excellent choice for a book about the senses. By nature, children love activity because there are so many things they’ve never tasted, touched, felt, heard, or seen. But adults also find this book irresistible. They, too, must try every game and activity in the book. The senses are physical and the mental process of reading about them without the physical experience is like describing the taste of strawberries to someone who had never eaten one. To understand taste, one must taste; to understand soft, one must feel something soft, and so on with all the senses. This topic seems to demand an activity approach; otherwise the understanding of the physical senses is not complete. The authors had to use an activity approach to allow the reader a way to connect the experience to the information supplied in the book. Other books on the body senses have suggested activities with them; the genius of these two authors is that they have used the pop-up movable type format so that the activities are physically built into the book itself. The bridge that lets the reader connect his experience to what is in a given book is a crucial factor in writing outstanding books. The knowledge in a book may be accurate and up to date, but if the expert who is writing it has not figured out a way to allow the reader to relate that information to his or her personality, the book will be labeled dull and uninteresting. That applies to any book written for adults or for children. If there’s no bridge to the reader’s personal experience, the book will not have appeal to its readers.

The author of *Do Animals Dream?* built that connection by using children’s own questions to organize the information in her book. It has the same facts as many other books about animals, but this one is organized in terms of children’s very personal way of approaching the study of animals. Their question, of course, have not just gone unanswered for children. All of us go around with unanswered questions in our heads and this book kindles our memory of those unsolved mysteries and adds some new ones. Again, it is that bridge built by a smart writer who also cares about whether her readers find answers to personal questions that makes it so easy for readers to relate this book to their personal experience.

In *Go In and Out the Window*, the bridge to the reader’s personal experience is through familiar old songs and art that many have never seen and certainly not in the context of how it
illuminates a song already known. It’s like having a new friend introduced by an old one. We feel we know them both and we are prepared to like the new friend because we like the old one. In this book, we like and look at the new paintings because we have enjoyed the old songs and we find that we understand both of them better.

The pictorial essay on Africa offers the bridge of excellent photographs. When children and adults can see what a person looks like, the food he eats, the home he lives in, the animals he has, and the clothes he wears, it’s a bit like being introduced to that person in the flesh. That’s what we see when we meet a new person—their physical appearance, clothes, perhaps their house, and some of the things they like to eat. The look into the world of someone else is the initial basis for building a relationship with that person. *African Journey* offered that introduction through excellent pictures.

Finally, Meltzer’s book offered the bridge of the eye witness account. His book on the Revolutionary War lets the reader feel that he is on the scene at important historic events because Meltzer had used the letters and diaries of people from all walks of life who were actually there on the scene.

In conclusion, children’s responses to four outstanding informational books have dramatically reinforced something I had known, but had underestimated the importance of: authors must find a way to extend a bridge from the information they want to put in a book to the personal experience of the reader. Depending on the topic of the book, those bridges will be unique to that particular content. As in the five books discussed, it might be activities to do, or organizing information from the child’s point of view, or combining the old familiar with the new, or using vivid photographs to introduce people, or the “was there” type of account, or any other number of combinations and approaches that fit the topic. It was rewarding both to see how authors take time to make their area of expertise understandable, and to see how universally children pinpointed the bridge that allowed them to relate to these outstanding informational books.