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Fourth Conference on Children’s Information Books:

Personal Views

by James S. Jacobs and Lillian Heil

Every other July those who produce the Brigham Young University Children’s Book Review sponsor a four-day conference devoted solely to nonfiction books for children. The purpose of the conference is to highlight the recent trends toward outstanding informational books. In the arena of children’s reading, fiction, traditionally, has received center stage in both reviews and awards. (The Newbery Medal, for instance, has honored a nonfiction title only six times since first given in 1922.) Nonfiction largely has played a bit part. Margery Facklam, author of sixty nonfiction books for children, has summed up the place of informational books as "utilitarian—like underwear and hot water tanks—the kinds of things you HAVE to buy when you’d really like caviar and cruisers."

No more. As pointed out by the nine speakers at Inside Information: The Fourth Conference of Nonfiction Books for Children, today’s nonfiction can light a fire under readers equally as well as fiction can.

For four days, over one hundred-fifty conference attendees listened to presentations and participated in discussions with authors Russell Freedman (New York City), Paul Fleischman (Pacific Grove, California), Terry Tempest Williams (Salt Lake City, Utah); author and editor Elizabeth Shub (New York City); librarian Marsha Cutler (Las Vegas, Nevada); professor Jill Locke (Greensboro, North Carolina); and a range of local presenters including Garn Coombs describing how to teach history without textbooks, Anne Cox on teaching critical thinking skills to young children, and the Wilson family showing activities they do with books.

Trudena Fager, librarian, summed up our feelings for the experience in her own response:
Two years ago I came away from the nonfiction book conference committed to using more nonfiction in the school library. I have done so, but this year that commitment was renewed and strengthened. I only hope I can pass some of that enthusiasm on to others who did not have the opportunity to attend the conference.

Sandra Davis: "The only problem with the conference is that it made me want to go out and buy a ton of books."
Terry Tempest Williams: "That which we do for ourselves, we do for the whole world."
Paul Fleischman: "Imagination is more important than intelligence."
Russell Freedman: "A book may live in a child’s memory for fifty years. I always try to remember that."
Elizabeth Shub didn’t realize that the publisher where she works is considered to be a nonfiction publisher. She just knew that the wide range of books are so interesting and fun to read.

For us, the focus of the conference was on the importance of caring. Paul Fleischman waited fifteen years for the pieces of a book which burned inside him to come together. Russell Freedman wrote with skill and was able to make a living from his writing. But when he caught the vision of using old photographs to illustrate what life was like for immigrant children, he went beyond the usual and his career took off.

Terry Tempest Williams cheerfully admitted that her writing did not earn a living for her, but something inside compels her to write about what she knows and feels. Her passionate concern for children, and her closeness to nature came alive for us as she read about her experiences with Navajo children.

Elizabeth Shub’s quiet competence as an editor, and her assurance that any manuscript sent to Greenwillow would be read, assured us that responsible book companies are as eager as writers to produce exciting, clear, informative books for children.

Marsha Cutler’s love for good stories was amply demonstrated by her dramatic storytelling style. One listener commented that Marsha’s performance made her realize "that it is not the subject, it is how the subject is presented." All of these speakers communicated their concern for children and their willingness to find time to share their knowledge with them.

As we read through the comments of participants, we realized that for each person there was a special highlight of the conference. For some it was the variety of books available; for others it was the chance to meet authors face to face; for some it was the idea of doing something extra with nonfiction books; or of having an excellent storyteller; or seeing the dramatization of Indian Chiefs; or getting the inside story on how award-
winning books are chosen. For those of us planning the conference, it was the contagious excitement of presenters and participants and the fact that we had people offering to help us publicize future conferences and assuring us that workshops on information books for children are something they want to know more about. We hope more of you lovers of children’s literature will join us in finding out about new nonfiction books in the summer of 1992.