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TRUTH, BEAUTY AND NON-FICTION

Thomas Kent Hinckley

More than anything else, I prize truth; and because I do, it has been exciting for me to review children's literature over the past ten years. In that time, children's non-fiction has improved dramatically. From my childhood, for instance, there are only two memorable non-fiction books: Stars for Sam and Giants of the Rails (both of which I still have), but with every year the quality of non-fiction books has improved and the number of outstanding books has increased.

Hegel said the day would come when people would write about bread without knowing anything about how to make bread. To their credit, authors now writing for children and young adults are disproving this daily. When Jill Barklem's Brambly Hedge Summer Story was published, I was so fascinated with the flour mill that I got out Oliver Evans's The Young Millwright's Guide (1853) and made all the basic gearing calculations to check her work. Imagine my delight to find that her mouse-sized mill was correct in every detail! Although young children need not know these engineering intricacies, it's heartening to be able to recommend the same book to the young for its pure joy that I recommend to college freshmen for its technical detail.

There have been, in the last decade, some authors seeking to impress by using a muddled sort of militant didacticism, and there have been grossly inaccurate books whose authors' motives remain enigmatic—but these have been in the minority. What stands out today are the many enthralling non-fiction books that captivate children and parents alike. In our family, for instance, we talked for days about Adkin's Heavy Machines. Moving Heavy Things, another Adkin masterpiece, has become a family legend since I, without thinking, mentioned marbles at the mausoleum. Another noteworthy point is that all of Eric Sloane's books have been reprinted in the last few years -- and no one has done more for the cause of historical truth in this country than has Eric Sloane.
Walker's Carpentry for Children is another excellent example of modern non-fiction. When I first saw the book, I thought, "Who's going to buy all that lumber?" but then I realized that kids aren't going to build all the projects at once. One of the best parts of this book is the picture of the author as a young lad on the starting line at the soapbox derby. And though he is never seen in the book, you sense his presence as a father on every page, teaching and watching, laughing and working, and taking those marvelous photographs. St. George's The Brooklyn Bridge, another brilliant and scrupulous technical book, is so well written that it can be read aloud with delight. No one else has told the story of those valiant Roebling women half so well.

Then there is the archetype of the non-fiction book of the eighties: Grand Constructions by Gian Paolo Ceserani, with illustrations by Piero Ventura. Here Ceserani not only tells us how the carbon-14 method of dating works but puts the reader right into the middle of the carbon-14 controversy. And this is done so that a fifth-grader can confront truth and ponder the same imponderables that adults must. Not only does Ceserani make lucid explanations as though he were the master builder, but Ventura draws as though he were trained by Leonardo himself.

The best non-fiction authors seem to have as their motto: Beauty is the passion of the mind; and thus the best work in the field is not merely factual, but also beautiful. More and more, the beauties of our world are being captured today in exquisite non-fiction for young people.