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What Do Children Like in Nonfiction?

by Lillian H. Heil

When 1,384 Utah children pick their favorite nonfiction book from among The Great Wall (Fisher), The Goose Family Book (Kalas), To Space and Back (Ride and Okie), How Much is a Million? (Schwartz and Kellogg) and Dinosaurs are Different (Aliki), which book will receive the most votes and why? In March 1988, 649 children (327 boys, 312 girls) from 24 schools cast votes to select How Much is a Million? as the one they liked the best.

A children’s choice contest has been sponsored by the Children’s Literature Association of Utah (CLAU) since 1980, but this is the first year five nonfiction books were nominated. On each ballot the child voter was asked to explain briefly what made the book likable and of what use the information would be. Over 85% of the 639 children answered one or both of the questions giving some clues as to what children like in nonfiction books.

The quality and humor of the illustrations was the biggest single reason (124 children mentioned pictures) children had for liking the book. An additional 81 children said they like the book because it was funny or done in a fun way. Some of the funny incidents mentioned were:

3 children - how far 1 million, 1 billion and 1 trillion children standing on each other’s shoulders would reach into space.

8 children - the number of 14,364 - star-filled pages it would take to make a million, billion, and trillion.

10 children - the wizard taking 23 days (and nights) to count to a million.

5 children - the wizard and children growing old and dying while counting to a billion and a trillion.

1 child - the wizard and children sailing high in the sky in a balloon.

11 children - the size of a goldfish bowl, stadium or harbor it would take to hold 1 million, billion or trillion goldfish.

Ninety-eight children liked knowing what large numbers really mean and 55 said they liked the interesting information. Fifty-nine rated the book in a generally positive way as good, neat, cute or interesting. Thirty-five alert youngsters said the comparisons used in the book really helped them to
understand what large numbers mean. A small group of children (5) appreciated the explanations at the back of the book telling how the author estimated the time it would take to count to a million or the size of the goldfish bowl it would take to hold a million fish. Another four children liked the book because it was easy to understand.

Evidently, the pictures and the humor played a big part in the popularity of the book, but it was also important to the children that they be able to understand the examples and comparisons to help visualize the largeness of these huge numbers.

The second question asked, related to the use children would make of the information. The largest category (mentioned by 137 children) was to understand what large numbers really mean. Two children, with their new insights into large numbers, decided that using the term “million” for purposes of hyperbole (e.g. I’ve told you a million times!) went beyond what exaggeration would allow. They vowed not to use the term anymore.

Children’s responses to the question of use revealed the visual images from the book that stuck in their minds. They made comments such as:

“I will remember how many pages (of stars) it took to reach a million.”

“Takes lots of goldfish to make a million.”

“Thinking of all those kids going that far will remind me how much a million really is.”

“I learned that it’s hard to make a million!” (He may be talking about money or stacks.)

“Tells how many days, weeks, or months it takes to count to a certain number.”

The illustrations also played a part in the category of telling someone else about the new knowledge gained which 32 children reported they planned to do. Several of these responses showed that they would use the comparisons from the book.

“I’ll tell my friends how long it would take to count to a million.”

“To tell how many days, weeks or months it takes to count to a certain number.”

“I could say that 1,000,000,000 kids is taller than the tallest building.”

Some of these children evidently plan to impress others with their new knowledge. One child said he would use the information to “trick his Mom.” (He’ll probably be quite successful since not many mothers have figured out how long it would take to count a million or how far a stack of a million children would extend into space.) Another child said the book would help him in the game of trivia and several said they planned to tell a friend or family or ask their family the questions and tell them the
answers (that might be one day Mom wouldn’t need to ask him what he learned in school.)

One child was so impressed with the immensity of large numbers that he said he would “grow up to be a millionaire.” Several other children’s comments revealed the association large digit numbers have with money. None of the visual comparisons in the book related to money but a few children said they remembered:

“a lot of money.”

“money getting bigger every time.”

It’s true that the numbers got bigger all the time going from one million to one billion to one trillion, but the examples given were how far a stack of children would reach into space, how large a space goldfish would take, how many pages (with 14,364 stars on them) it would take or how many days and years it would take to count to mega numbers. The zeros in these numbers must have served as a dollar symbol because money wasn’t mentioned. A final note on the subject of money were the children who said their use of the book related to money; one child realized “how much money is worth.” A second one said “It would help you know how much you have to pay, if you buy something for a million dollars.” (Perhaps a copy of this book would be worthwhile to U.S. legislators in helping to control our national debt?) A third child said, “If I ever get a million I will know how big I would need the container.” This child should team up with the fourth who said, “If I’m right, I’ll bet a million.” (The two could split the amount and still have a lot of money.)

Two other large categories were more general in nature - to help the child in counting (42) and to help him in math or science (62). Two children, however, specified that the book helped them in math because:

“It shows math is fun.”

“that counting can be fun.”

Since 81 children said the book was funny or written in a fun way, the two children just quoted were probably not the only ones who discovered that math can be fun. The fun in the book encouraged humorous responses from children. One smart alec said he learned “not to count for 200,000 years (the time it was estimated for counting to a trillion) and twenty children said the use they would make of it is:

“never to count to a million!”

That seemed much wiser than the 31 who said they would use the book:

“to count to a million.”
Hopefully they didn’t mean that literally or it will occupy several months of their waking hours (the 23 day estimate was day and night) to complete the task. If they did mean it literally, those children missed the point of the book so they would be, as historians say, doomed to repeat the mistakes of history rather than learn from them.

There were six bright souls who quipped that they weren’t about to be one of the million, billion or trillion children stacked on each other’s shoulders with comments such as:

“It showed you how high you would go if you stack one million people on top of each other — I will not be a person on top of another.”

“All those kids get on top of the shoulders and they go on and on and on — never get on the shoulders because they fell.” (No picture showed them falling, but the portion of the trillion-kid stack silhouetted against the moon was leaning worse than the Tower of Pisa.)

“Never stand on anybody’s shoulders. You might go out of this world.” (This one must have been a group creative effort with four children in the same class writing exactly the same response.)

Nine children looked to school assignments for their use and said the book could be used for a book report. Hopefully, the creative contents would make this a reasonably happy experience for the child because ordinarily, writing book reports is not high on the list of activities children like to do. In fact, one girl reported she would use the book to be more creative in art herself. Some of the other unique comments were:

“I will use what I learned in the book to ask people questions.” (It would be fun to be there when she stumps children or adults with her questions about how long it would take to count to a million, or billion or trillion.)

“It used simple steps to show what it was saying. Now I will be able to estimate other things since I know this.” (Can’t you just picture this child having a good time estimating how far a million cars would reach or trees or rose bushes? The possibilities are endless.)

And this kindred spirit said:

“The answers were surprising. I enjoy making up and solving problems and this will help me with it.” (This child may come up with some real mind bogglers.)

Finally, speaking as one who helped choose the books nominated, it’s rewarding to know that a book can make math fun and increase children’s understanding of numbers. Their comments provide
a good final statement for what 649 children thought about *How Much is a Million*?

“I know what I’m talking about when I say a million.”

“not thinking of a million as small.” (That’s the understatement of the year for any young math student.)

“I learned that a million is more than you think.”

“that counting is fun.”