

What Teachers Need to Know About the “New” Nonfiction

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Today’s nonfiction children’s books provide new ways to convey information, and teachers must learn new ways to share these books with children.

“Hey, kids! Did you know that in the 1930s most Americans did not own TVs? But you know what they did have? The radio!” So begins the text of *Aliens Are Coming! The True Account of the 1938 War of the Worlds Radio Broadcast* (McCarthy, 2006). In these few words, author and illustrator Meghan McCarthy invites young readers into the book by using a reader-friendly tone, asking a question to make the reading interactive, and helping readers make connections between their experiences with television and the way people in the 1930s experienced radio. Even before they begin to read the text, however, children are attracted to this book by the cover, end papers, and title page. Illustrated in cartoon style, the cover features two green aliens with eyes on stalks and octopus-like appendages. The title is done in a childlike font, and the word *Coming* looks like it is written in oozing green goo. The endpapers show cartoon spaceships and flying saucers, while on the title page a cartoon alien points toward the earth. The title, with its exclamation point and colorful block letters, is reminiscent of an old-time movie poster. Together these features give the book a light-hearted tone and invite children inside.

Written with only a few lines per page, the book tells the story of Orson Welles’s famous radio broadcast that caused widespread fear and panic. Illustrations in black and white depict scenes of the 1930s, while bright colors are used to show how people imagined the scenes being described on the

radio. Excerpts from the text of the radio broadcast help readers understand the impact of the broadcast on radio listeners. Detailed endnotes give more information about the story of the broadcast and include a sidebar about H.G. Wells and a bibliography.

Aliens Are Coming! is just one of many recent nonfiction books that have features that attract young readers, help them learn about a topic, and invite further thinking and exploration. The purpose of this article is to help teachers understand and share the features of these new nonfiction picture books, a genre that is exploding in both quantity and quality.

The Rise of Nonfiction

Although teachers today use many trade books in their classrooms, most of these are fiction (Duke, 2000). For years, fictional stories were thought to be more appropriate for young children, and few nonfiction books were written for younger readers. Nonfiction was virtually ignored by children’s literature experts and teachers alike (Moss, 2003). In recent years, however, we have come to realize that young children delight in learning about the world. In addition, there has been a growing realization of the importance of helping children learn strategies for reading the nonfiction texts they will increasingly be faced with in the upper grades. Moss (2003) asserted that “early exposure to the language of nonfiction can help enhance children’s understanding of exposition and may prevent the difficulties many students encounter with these texts later on” (p. 9).

At the same time, recent years have seen “an explosion of this genre in terms of availability, variety, and excellence for all ages” (Bamford & Kristo, 2000, p. 50). No other genre of children’s literature “has changed as radically in recent years as nonfiction” (Moss, 2003, p. 10). Although many of the award-

winning books in this genre have been lengthy chapter books that required advanced reading skills, I have found a number of recent nonfiction books in picture book format that are absolutely enchanting. This “new” genre—the nonfiction picture book—will delight teachers and students alike.

What are the features of today’s nonfiction picture books? To find out, I began by reviewing recent award-winning and honor books from three children’s books awards: the Sibert Medal winners for 2008, given by the American Library Association to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished informational book published in English each year; the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children given by the National Council of Teachers of English in 2008; and nonfiction books from the Children’s Choices list for 2007. Although many of the books on the Children’s Choices list were not winners of other awards, I included books from this list because I wanted to see what features appealed to children, as well as to adult reviewers.

Although not all of the books winning these awards were picture books (which I defined for this study as books with no more than 48 pages, in which pictures and text were equally important in conveying information), many of them were, especially those on the Children’s Choices list. Using interlibrary loan at my university, I did my best to obtain copies of all of the Sibert and Orbis Pictus winners for 2008, along with nonfiction books on the Children’s Choices list for 2007. In my analysis of these books, I found several outstanding features: an emphasis on the visual, including illustrations and design layouts; an emphasis on accuracy; and engaging writing styles, including formats that invite interaction. In the following sections, I discuss and give examples of these features, which teachers use to help them select nonfiction books (see Figure 1).

Features of Nonfiction Picture Books

Visual Emphasis

One radical change in recent children’s nonfiction has been the emphasis on visually attractive design layouts (Giblin, 2000). Carter (2000) said that

Forty years ago, children read nonfiction books with small type and limited illustrations.... Today, they encounter books with carefully designed illustrations

Reflection Question

- It was recently found that student “dialogue” is a powerful tool in improving learning. How could nonfiction picture books like those described in this article be useful in increasing dialogue about new vocabulary?

that partner with the text to contribute to their thinking.... Illustrations introduce core concepts necessary for understanding a topic and serve as integral portions of each book. (p. 707)

Every book I reviewed contained illustrations or other visual features on almost every page. Although all of the books are visually appealing, many also use the visual elements to convey information. Illustrations appear on the covers, endpapers, copyright pages, and title pages, as well as in tables of contents and end matter such as notes from the authors. Many nonfiction books now contain sidebars, use different typefaces to emphasize text, have additional information in the margins, and include captioned photos.

In *Sled Dogs* (Haskins, 2006), two-page spreads provide information in the form of large and small captioned photographs, sidebars, and text. Design elements such as the black background, blue frames around photographs and other features, and even the blue shape around the page number, contribute to a whole that is visually pleasing.

In another well-designed book, *Why Do Dogs Have Wet Noses?* (Coren, 2006), each page has a subtle background print with a dog-bone pattern, a border of dog bones across the top, and a dog bone over the page number at the bottom of the page. Photographs of varying sizes, some in frames and other with text wrapping around them, help break up the text, as do the headings written in a playful, uneven typeface. The same typeface is used on the cover, which features a photograph of a cute puppy with his head tilted inquisitively.

Stunning, high-quality, glossy photographs by wildlife photographers dominate the book *Slippery, Slimy Baby Frogs* (Markle, 2006b), providing information in

Figure 1 Criteria for Selecting Nonfiction Picture Books

Is the book visually appealing?

- Are the front and back covers appealing?
- Are the endpapers appealing? Do they contribute to the topic, theme, or tone of the book?
- Do the title page, dedication page, table of contents, and other pages contain illustrations?
- Is the typeface easy to read? Does the book use typefaces or text layout to highlight information? Does the choice of typeface contribute to the topic, theme, or tone of the book?
- Are the illustrations appealing?
- Is the text broken up with illustrations, sidebars, headings, white space, and other features?
- Are the illustrations and book design colorful? Do the colors contribute to the topic, theme, or tone of the book?
- Are borders used?

Is the book accurate and authoritative?

- Are consultants listed?
- Is information about the research process provided in introductory or endnotes, source notes, or bibliographies?
- Are there suggestions for further reading?
- Are supplemental materials such as glossaries and tables of important dates included?
- Do illustrations accurately depict the text?
- Are animals depicted accurately without anthropomorphism?
- Is the book a blend of fact and fiction? If so, is it clear which parts of the book are fact and which are fiction?

Is the writing style engaging?

- Does the author draw the reader in with an engaging lead?
- Are ideas logically ordered?
- Is the background knowledge of the reader considered? Are new ideas connected to what children already know?
- Is the language appropriate for the audience?
- Does the author write without condescension?
- Is the author able to explain difficult concepts clearly and simply?
- Does the author use an appropriate tone?
- Are there interactive elements that help involve the reader?
- Are new terms clearly explained, highlighted, and defined in a glossary?

visual form that is as important as the information in the text. Nic Bishop's *Spiders* (2007) combines beautiful photographs, colorful backgrounds, and typefaces that change in size and color to emphasize important or interesting points.

A unique and creative approach to illustration can be found in *What Athletes Are Made Of* (Piven, 2006), in which portraits of famous athletes are composed of simple painted shapes and everyday objects chosen to convey something about the athlete. Muhammad Ali's portrait, for example, includes a bell for a nose and tiny microphones for eyebrows. A hot dog on a bun makes Babe Ruth's mouth, golf tees make up Tiger Woods's eyebrows, and Michael Jordan's tongue is a piece of basketball skin!

Clearly, visual elements play an important role in today's children's nonfiction books. Moss (2003) asserted that today's nonfiction books are "designed to engage today's visually oriented learners" (p. 12). Information is conveyed in both text and illustrations; in addition, the visual elements often enhance the reading experience in more subtle ways. For example, kids will enjoy reading about the largest and smallest dogs in the world and learning about how dogs communicate in *Why Do Dogs Have Wet Noses?* (Coren, 2006), just as they'll enjoy and learn from the photographs of the dogs. Other features, too, such as the subtle dog-bone print in the background and dog-bone borders, are a part of the pleasure of this experience.

Accuracy

Another feature in recent children's nonfiction books is the emphasis on accuracy. Many books now include information about the research process, which might be found in introductory comments or endnotes, as well as source notes, bibliographies, and suggestions for further reading (Bamford & Kristo, 2000; Giblin, 2000; Hepler, 2003). Often, expert consultants are acknowledged. Glossaries, tables of important dates, indexes, and other kinds of supplemental materials provide further information for the reader.

Many of the books reviewed showed this kind of concern for providing accurate and authoritative information. For example, *Aliens Are Coming! The True Account of the 1938 War of the Worlds Radio Broadcast* (McCarthy, 2006), *Sled Dogs* (Haskins, 2006), *Little Lost Bat* (Markle, 2006a), *Sporting Events: From Baseball to Skateboarding* (Kaufman, 2006),

Spiders (Bishop, 2007), and *Slippery, Slimy Baby Frogs* (Markle, 2006b), all contain author's notes and other features that provide more information, describe the research process, or acknowledge the contribution of experts. The author of *Extreme Animals: The Toughest Creatures on Earth* (Davies, 2006) has a degree in zoology. Author Sarah L. Thomson added authority to her books *Amazing Dolphins!* (2006a) and *Amazing Snakes!* (2006b) by teaming up with the Wildlife Conservation Society, which provided the photographs for the books. Many of the books contain bibliographies and suggestions for further reading, including online resources. Such features not only "help readers evaluate a book's accuracy" (Bamford & Kristo, 2000, p. 50); they "honor young readers by giving them entry into processes of writing" as they learn "how writers of nonfiction think and work" (Wilson, 2006, p. 62).

Although accuracy and authority may be a trend in recent nonfiction, not all books reflect this trend. Wilson (2006) described how members of the Orbis Pictus Award Committee are interested in "the presence of back matter, the bibliographies or reference lists, endnotes, author notes about the references and quotations included in the book, the photo credits, and the acknowledgements of people connected with the research and writing of the book" (p. 56), but they are concerned that a number of books they review, especially those for younger readers, do not have such features. Although not all of the nonfiction books reviewed have all of these features, the vast majority had at least a consultant listed. Even so, there are some problems with accuracy in several of the books I reviewed.

Extreme Animals: The Toughest Creatures on Earth (Davies, 2006), is engagingly and authoritatively written by zoologist Nicola Davies. The author's expertise is clearly evident in her descriptions of animals that can survive extreme temperatures and pressures (and one animal that can be put in a blender, and when placed back in seawater, will pull itself back together—it's a sponge!). Unfortunately, the illustrations for this book, childlike drawings by Neal Layton, do not always convey accurate information. An illustration showing how penguins keep heat from escaping from their feet does not match the explanation in the text (pp. 14–15). On page 16, the text says that some birds sleep huddled together to keep warm, but the illustration is an anthropomorphic depiction of birds sleeping in a row of beds.

Accuracy is also a problem in *The Adventures of Pelican Pete: Annie the River Otter* (Keiser & Keiser, 2006). This book is obviously intended to be an informational children's book. Six different experts from the North American River Otter Liaison and elsewhere are acknowledged; supplemental features include a bulleted list of information about otters and a feature showing readers how "To Learn More" about woodland fires and wildlife rehabilitators. In the "About the Author and Illustrator" section, the book is described as "an accurate and educational depiction of nature" (n.p.). In the story, Annie the river otter tells Pelican Pete the story of growing up with her family and then being separated from them by a fire. Pelican Pete then tells Annie about an animal rescue center, which is described by Pelican Pete as "a wonderful place I'll lead you to./They rescue animals and heal them quick—/Orphaned, strained, injured or sick./When we're in need, we hurry there/ For wildlife rescue and animal care" (n.p.). The book does not show how wildlife are found or taken care of; in fact, no people appear in the text or illustrations. Children are led to believe that animals make their own way to rescue centers, and they are given no information about the kind of care animals receive there. The blending of fiction and nonfiction in this book has caused the facts to be distorted out of all reality. (The book is understandably classified as fiction by the Library of Congress.)

The fictionalization of children's nonfiction seems to be a recurring trend. Giblin (2000) noted that before 1960,

many nonfiction authors and editors thought the best way to interest youngsters in science was to surround the facts with a fictional framework.... The Let's Read and Find Out series and others like it put an end to this particular brand of nonfiction hybrid, which usually succeeded neither as fiction nor as nonfiction. (p. 419)

More recently, however, this trend toward fictionalization has reemerged. Zarnowski (2001) noted that although some authors and critics have argued for strict accuracy in children's nonfiction, "there are several strong proponents of intermingling fiction and nonfiction" (p. 16). For example, Avery (2003) argued that the use of narrative "captures the hearts and the minds of readers of all ages" and that narrative stories have "opened nonfiction to many more young readers" (p. 241). Avery referred to books that blend fiction and nonfiction, such as those that

present factual information from the perspective of a fictional character, as “faction,” and asserted that they “qualify as nonfiction in our classrooms” (p. 242). Yet Smith (2001) asserted that “while they may be interesting to read, ‘factions’ are at best deceptive, and they are unacceptable to those seeking accurate interpretations of events, issues, and phenomena” (p. 32). Similarly, Bamford, Kristo, and Lyon (2002) wondered “if this kind of book sends a distorted message to young readers about what nonfiction is. High quality nonfiction doesn’t preclude an author from using personal narrative but, in doing so, the writing should never mask the truth or the facts to be clever or cute” (p. 9).

Bamford and Kristo (2000) used the term *informational picture storybook* to describe books like the popular Magic School Bus series, which “look and read like picture storybooks because information is carried within the narrative by invented characters or situations. However, these books are supported by facts because the primary purpose is to provide information” (p. 13). They asserted that problems with informational picture storybooks arise “when it is not clear to the reader what is fact and what is fiction” and suggested that teachers should “help readers separate fiction from nonfiction by highlighting text notes, afterwards, and acknowledgments” (p. 13).

Colman (2007) argued for strict accuracy in children’s nonfiction, yet she added that simple definitions, such as fiction is made up and nonfiction is true, fiction is narrative and nonfiction is expository, fiction is for pleasure and nonfiction is for information, are misleading and inadequate. She pointed out that “fiction and nonfiction can have many similar and overlapping characteristics” (p. 267) including the use of both narrative and expository writing.

Little Lost Bat (Markle, 2006a) used a narrative structure to tell the story of a baby Mexican free-tailed bat. In *Look What Whiskers Can Do* (Souza, 2006), the author used both expository and narrative text. To give general information, an expository style is used. Sometimes, however, a more narrative style is used: “An animal is sleeping high in a tree. Its legs are wrapped around a branch. Its tail covers its eyes” (p. 14).

Engaging Writing

McClure (2003) described elements of style that authors of the best children’s nonfiction books use to

make their work appealing. She explained that good nonfiction books are clear and coherent; they are “carefully organized, using logically ordered ideas and understandable language along with examples that account for the background knowledge of readers” (p. 80). She added that good nonfiction authors communicate their passion for the subject and write in a tone that does not condescend to children. They use language appropriate for the intended age level of the reader, but must be able to explain difficult vocabulary and concepts. They draw their readers in with engaging leads and write conclusions that “leave the reader either feeling satisfied or wanting to know more” (p. 92).

In the excerpt from *Aliens Are Coming! The True Account of the 1938 War of the Worlds Radio Broadcast* (McCarthy, 2006) that began this article, author Meghan McCarthy draws readers into the story with her reader-friendly style and a thought-provoking question: “Hey, kids! Did you know that in the 1930s most Americans did not own TVs?” Authors of nonfiction picture books use many elements of style and organization to make their writing both engaging and informative.

Author Lori Haskins (2006) grabs the reader’s attention with the first line of *Sled Dogs*: “The people of Nome, Alaska were in trouble.” In *Extreme Animals: The Toughest Creatures on Earth*, Nicola Davies (2006) presents fascinating information in a light-hearted tone:

Polar bears can keep warm in conditions that would kill a human, but in one important way, a polar bear is just as much of a wimp as we are: if its body temperature drops by more than a few degrees, it can die. The Truly Tough Animals are the ones that can let their bodies get really cold right through and still survive. (p. 19)

Author Hanoch Piven (2006), in *What Athletes Are Made Of*, gains readers’ interest and communicates his enthusiasm for his subject in an author’s note at the beginning of the book:

Do you know how many home runs Babe Ruth hit in his career? Do you know how many soccer goals Mia Hamm scored in her first year on the U.S. National Team? Lots of people know scores and records about their favorite athletes. But sometimes we don’t know as much about what great athletes are like as people.... There are many great athletes in the world, and I could not include all of them in this book. Instead I have selected athletes whose stories have a personal meaning for me. Some were chosen because of their undisputed

greatness, and some because they have an inspiring or interesting story to tell. (n.p.)

A number of nonfiction picture books engage readers with an interactive format. *Food Creations: From Hot Dogs to Ice Cream Cones* (Ball, 2006) and *Sporting Events: From Baseball to Skateboarding* (Kaufman, 2006), ask readers to guess “Which Came First?” Readers are given information about a pair such as hot dogs and hamburgers or basketball and golf, are asked to predict which came first, and must turn the page to find out if they were correct. *Venom* (Singer, 2007) keeps readers actively involved through a variety of activities such as quizzes and a matching exercise in which pictures of venomous animals are to be matched with the venom delivery system they use.

Sarah L. Thomson’s (2006a) *Amazing Dolphins!*, an easy reader written with short sentences, is still informative and thought-provoking: “Dolphins whistle and squeak. They chirp and pop. They make noises that sound like clicks or claps. Why do dolphins make all these sounds?” (pp. 4–5). Thomson relates new information to what children already know:

Dolphins live underwater, but they are not fish. They are small whales. Whales are mammals. People are mammals, too. All mammals need to breathe air. You use your mouth to breathe, to eat, and to make sounds. A dolphin uses its mouth to eat. It uses the blowhole on top of its head to breathe and to make sounds. (pp. 10–11)

Similarly, *Look What Whiskers Can Do* (Souza, 2006) begins with what kids already know. “Have you ever noticed a cat’s whiskers? The hairs are long and stiff. Each one is two to three times thicker than the animal’s other hairs” (p. 7). Headings appear in large print, and words in bold in the text are defined in the glossary. Author D.M. Souza explains new vocabulary extremely well: “Scientists call whiskers **vibrissae**. The word once meant to shake or vibrate. Whiskers let many animals called **mammals** feel movements or vibrations in both air and water” (p. 8).

Sandra Markle’s (2006b) photo-essay *Slippery, Slimy Baby Frogs* is well organized into sections that follow one other in a logical, cohesive manner. For example, the “On Their Own” section begins, “Because most adult frogs leave their eggs once they are laid, most baby frogs grow up without parents (n.p.).” The next section, “Taking Care of Baby,” follows logically from the previous one: “Some baby

frogs do get special care from their parents while they’re growing up” (n.p.).

In contrast, two books I reviewed had some problems with style and organization. *Horses*, a photo-essay by prolific and award-winning children’s nonfiction author Seymour Simon (2006), has beautiful glossy photos on the cover, endpapers, title page, and each page throughout the book, yet the text seems to present a succession of unrelated facts in no order, with photos that don’t always support the text. On one page, Simon discusses the names for horses of different colors; the accompanying photograph, however, does not show the kinds of horses discussed. There is also a discussion of breeds of horses that includes the terms *hotbloods*, *coldbloods*, and *warmbloods*. Unfortunately Simon doesn’t explain that these terms have nothing to do with being warm- or coldblooded as the terms are normally used, which makes this highly confusing for the reader.

Lukens (2003) has said that nonfiction authors sometimes condescend to children by “oversimplifying, thinking of the readers as dear little things, or guarding their ears from the whole truth” (p. 290), and that “condescension often takes the form of anthropomorphism, an attitude that suggests a lack of interesting qualities in the animals themselves” (p. 292). In addition to its use of anthropomorphism, *The Adventures of Pelican Pete: Annie the River Otter* (Keiser & Keiser, 2006) uses a sappy, condescending tone: “For all the children good and sweet:/ I’ll tell a tale of Pelican Pete: And for all who were bad today:/ I’ll tell the story anyway” (n.p.).

Nonfiction authors sometimes condescend to children by “oversimplifying, thinking of the readers as dear little things, or guarding their ears from the whole truth.”

Choosing and Sharing Nonfiction Picture Books

Sources of Information About Nonfiction Picture Books

Teachers who want to discover the possibilities of nonfiction picture books may start by browsing local

libraries and bookstores. Book awards are another source for good nonfiction picture books. In addition to the Children's Choices list (www.reading.org/resources/booklists/childrenschoices.aspx), the Orbis Pictus Award (www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus), and the Sibert Medal (www.ala.org), there are other nonfiction book awards that teachers may want to consult. The National Science Teachers' Association and the Children's Book Council publishes a yearly list of Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K–12 (www.nsta.org/publications/ostb), and the Children's Book Council also teams up with the National Council for the Social Studies to create an annual list of Notable Social Studies Trade Books for Young People (www.socialstudies.org/resources/notable). The Caldecott Medal and its Honor List (www.ala.org) may also include nonfiction picture books, and the *Boston Globe–The Horn Book Awards* (www.hbook.com) include a category for nonfiction. *The Horn Book* also publishes a list of best picture books, fiction books, and nonfiction books each year in its “Fanfare” list.

In addition, many nonfiction authors have their own webpages, like Steve Jenkins, author of Caldecott Honor Book *What Do You Do With a Tail Like This?* (Jenkins, 2004) and many other beautifully illustrated books (www.stevejenkinsbooks.com).

Choosing Nonfiction Picture Books

Teachers can use the three features of nonfiction picture books discussed herein to help them choose books for their classrooms.

1. Are the books visually appealing? Look for books with attractive and accurate illustrations, page layouts that break up text, borders and other interesting design features, attractive and readable typefaces, and appropriate use of color for page backgrounds, text, and other features.
2. Do the books provide accurate, authoritative information? Look for books with consultants listed and source notes or other features that contain information about the research process. In addition, choose books in which the illustrations accurately depict the content, and in which the information is presently realistically, without anthropomorphism.

3. Are they engagingly written? Look for books that make good teachers! Good nonfiction books should be well organized, should grab readers' attention, take readers' likely background knowledge into consideration, and clearly explain new terms. In addition, look for books that present information in creative ways, and that encourage reader interaction with the text.

Sharing Nonfiction Picture Books With Children

Because today's nonfiction children's books provide new ways to convey information, teachers need to learn new ways to share these books with children. Nonfiction picture books convey information not only in the text, but also in endpapers, supplemental materials such as tables of important dates, and so on. On each page of the text, they may convey information with illustrations, sidebars, typefaces, boxed information on outside margins, captioned photos, and other features. Instead of reading from top to bottom and front to back, these kinds of features can be viewed in any order; they “permit, and actually invite, nonlinear, nonsequential exploration” (Kerper, 2001, p. 27). Teachers can demonstrate such nonsequential exploration, showing students the many different ways they can learn about the topic. Teachers can also help students notice the features of nonfiction picture books by asking students, “How does this page help you understand this topic?” They can point out text in bold or unusual typefaces and ask why they are used. They can draw students' attention to information gained in illustrations, captions, and sidebars.

In another lesson, teachers may want to focus on the accuracy of the book. By asking, “Who wrote this book? How did he or she find out this information?” teachers can interest students in the author's notes, source notes, or other information provided, and help them understand what writers do.

In particular, teachers will want to think carefully about the types of books they present as “nonfiction,” and help students notice when some books blend fact and fiction. When using blended books, teachers should help students understand what is factual and what has been fictionalized, and why the author may have chosen to blend the two.

Finally, teachers may want to invite students to study nonfiction picture books as they write and design their own books. Asking questions such as, what features make this book fun to read? What helped you learn about the topic? may help students think about the various tasks of writing, illustrating, and designing a nonfiction book.

The nonfiction picture book is a genre that is exploding in both quality and quantity. By sharing and filling their classrooms with good nonfiction picture books, teachers can help children learn about the world and get them started on a lifetime of reading and learning.

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