

CHAPTER 9 Nonfiction: Information, Literary Nonfiction, Biographies, and Self-Help Books



Focus Box 9.1

Intriguing Facts

Alone in the World: Orphans and Orphanages in America by Catherine Reef. Clarion, 2005. Reef's informative and well-done book takes up where the accounts of orphan trains leave off. Relatively few children were sent on orphan trains; the others lived in poorhouses or almshouses right next to criminals and people judged to be insane.

An Inconvenient Truth: The Crisis of Global Warming by Al Gore, adapted by Jane O'Connor. Viking/Rodale, 2007. O'Connor's book is much shorter than the adult version, but it preserves the message, as well as many of its striking visuals.

Behind the Mask of Spider-Man: The Secrets of the Movie by Mark Cotta Vaz. Ballantine, 2002. Photos and production drawings add interest to this intriguing look at both the human and the technological challenges faced by the producers and the actors of the blockbuster movie.

Black and White Airmen: Their True History by John Fleischman. Houghton Mifflin, 2007. John Leahr was black and Herb Heilbrun was white in a time when racism was rampant. They grew up together and went into the WW II Air Force, successfully flying fifty missions as partners. Theirs is only one of the many fascinating stories about black and white airmen fighting together after Pearl Harbor.

Body Marks: Tattooing, Piercing, and Scarifying by Kathryn Gay and Christine Whittington. 21st Century Books, 2002. One of the most interesting parts of this 112-page book is its explanation of how body markings both separate and unite cultures and generations.

Chew on This: Everything You Don't Want to Know about Fast Food by Eric Schlosser and Charles Wilson. Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Schlosser and Wilson give colorful stories, photographs, anecdotes and other eye-opening information to explain such slogans as "supersize me,"

"have it your way," and "everything you don't want to know about fast food."

Hurricane Force: Tracking America's Killer Storms by Joseph B. Treaster. New York Times, 2007. Treaster starts with the Galveston storm in 1900 and goes through Katrina and Rita in 2005.

Quotations for Kids, edited and compiled by J. A. Senn, illustrated by Steve Pica. Millbrook, 1999. Humorous full-color cartoons add interest to over 2,000 quotations in this 256-page book.

Skyscraper by Lynn Curlee. Atheneum, 2007. Dramatic acrylic illustrations and lucid prose tell the history of skyscrapers.

Steven Caney's Ultimate Building Book by Steven Caney, illustrated by Lauren House. Running Press, 2006. *Building* is examined in its broadest sense, encompassing everything from skyscrapers and bridges to bird feeders and peanut-shell "bricks."

Tracking Trash: Flotsam, Jetsam, and the Science of Ocean Motion by Loree Griffin Burns. Houghton Mifflin, 2007. Burns shows how currents, weather, climate, and the environment are interrelated. Read this book if you want to find out about ghost nets, nurdles, and the differences between flotsam, jetsam, plankton, ice floes, and other debris.

Who Was First? Discovering the Americas by Russell Freedman. Clarion, 2007. Freedman is the consummate researcher and his stories about Christopher Columbus, Chinese treasure-ships, and the wanderings of Leif Erikson and the Vikings, along with clues about the origins of the first Native Americans, may inspire young readers to share his enthusiasm for researching historical mysteries.

Evaluation of Nonfiction

Evaluating nonfiction for young readers is more complicated than evaluating fiction because

1. People select informational books primarily on the basis of the subject matter, and because there is such a variety in subjects, people's choices vary tremendously, resulting in a lack of consensus on what is "the best."
2. Informative books on such topics as computers and car repair become dated more quickly than fiction books. Students preparing to take the SAT tests, wanting advice on handling money, or planning for a career need the most recent information. The constant turnover of informative books leaves us with few touchstone examples.
3. The transitory nature of informative nonfiction books discourages teachers and critics from giving them serious consideration as instructional materials. Although well-written personal experience narratives have

longer life spans, people who have made up their minds that they are not interested in nonfiction find it easy to ignore all nonfiction.

4. Reviewers and prize givers may not feel competent to judge the technical or other specialized information presented in many informative books. Also, many reviewers, especially those working with educational journals, come from an English-teaching tradition, and they tend to focus on books that would be used in conjunction with literature rather than biology, home economics, social studies, industrial arts, history, or business classes.
5. In evaluating nonfiction, there is no generally agreed-upon theory of criticism or criteria for judgment.

We suggest that the evaluation situation can be improved by readers looking at the intended audience and the content of the book. (What is it about? What information does it present?) Then look at the appropriateness and success with which each of the following is established. Examining a nonfiction book carefully enough to be able to describe the setting or scope and the theme, tone, and style will give you insights into how well it is written and packaged. Also, for information books, look at the more specific suggestions in Table 9.1.

Setting/Scope Informative books may be historical, restricted to regional interests, or have a limited scope. In evaluating these, one needs to ask whether the author set realistic goals, considering the reading level of the intended audience and the amount of space and backup graphics available.

Theme Informational books also have themes or purposes that are closely tied to the author's point of view. Authors may write in hopes of persuading someone to a particular belief or to inspire thoughtfulness, respect, or even curiosity. Some authors shout out their themes; others are more subtle. You need to consider consistency as you evaluate the theme. Did the author build on a consistent theme throughout the book?

Tone The manner in which an author achieves a desired goal—whether it is to persuade, inform, inspire, or amuse—sets the tone of a book. Is it hard-sell, strident, one-sided, humorous, loving, sympathetic, adulatory, scholarly, pedantic, energetic, or leisurely? Authors of informative books for children used to take a leisurely approach as they tried to entice children into becoming interested in their subject. Today's young readers, however, are just as busy as their parents and most likely go to informative books for quick information rather than leisure time entertainment. A boy or girl who wants to repair a bicycle does not want to read the history of the Wright brothers and their bicycle shop before getting to the part on slipped gears.

Style The best informative books also have style. As author Jane Langton said when she was asked to serve as a judge, the good books “exude some kind of passion or love or caring . . . and they have the potential for leaving a mark on the readers, changing them in some way.”³ George A. Woods, former children's editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, said that he selected the informational books to be featured in his reviews mostly on his own “gut-level” reactions to what was “new or far better than what we have

TABLE 9.1 Suggestions for Evaluating Informative Nonfiction

A good piece of informative writing usually has:

A subject of interest to young readers, written about with zest. Information that is up-to-date and accurate.

New information or information organized in such a way as to present a different point of view than in previously available books.

A reading level, vocabulary, and tone of writing that are at a consistent level appropriate to the intended audience.

An organization in which basic information is presented first so that chapters and sections build on each other.

An index and other aids to help readers look up facts if they want to return to the book for specific information or to glean ideas and facts without reading the entire book.

Adequate documentation of the sources of information, including some original sources.

Information to help interested students locate further readings on the subject.

In how-to books, clear and accurate directions including complete lists of the equipment and supplies needed in a project.

Illustrations that add interest as well as clarity to the text.

A competent author with expertise in the subject matter.

A poor piece of informative writing may have:

Obsolete or inaccurate information or illustrations. Even one such occurrence causes the reader to lose faith in the rest of the book.

Evidence of cutting-and-pasting in which the author merely reorganized previously prepared material without developing anything new in content or viewpoint.

Inconsistencies in style or content, for example, college-level vocabulary but a childish or cute style of writing.

An awkward mix of fiction and nonfiction techniques through which the author unsuccessfully tries to slip information in as an unnoticed part of the story.

A reflection of out-of-date or socially unfair attitudes, for example, a history book that presents only the history of white upper-class men with a title and introduction that give the impression that it is a comprehensive history of the time period being covered.

A biased presentation in which only one side of a controversial issue is presented with little or no acknowledgment that many people hold different viewpoints.

In how-to books, frustrating directions that oversimplify or set up unrealistic expectations so that the reader is disappointed in the result.

had before.” He looked for a majesty of language and uniqueness and for books that would add to children’s understanding by making them eyewitnesses to history.⁴ A problem in examining an author’s style is that each book must be judged according to the purpose the author had in mind. From book to book, purposes are so different that it is like the old problem of comparing apples and oranges. Some books are successful simply because they are different—more like a mango than an apple or an orange.



Recent Biographies

The Adventures of Marco Polo by Russell Freedman, illustrated by Bagram Ibatoulline. Scholastic, 2006. Ibatoulline's paintings at the beginning of each chapter, along with the ornate calligraphy, lend a sense of dignity and authenticity to Freedman's telling.

Ben Franklin's Almanac: Being a True Account of the Good Gentleman's Life by Candace Fleming. Simon & Schuster/Atheneum, 2003. The author intended to write a straightforward account of Franklin's life, but the longer she worked the more she learned about him and his wide-ranging interests and activities. She ended up telling his story in a format much like the original *Poor Richard's Almanack*.

Dickens: His Work and His World by Michael Rosen, illustrated by Robert Ingpen. Candlewick, 2005. Teachers wanting to bring more life to their reading of a Charles Dickens piece would be wise to bring in Rosen's book. It is well written and well illustrated, plus Rosen discusses some of the literary devices that Dickens used.

Escape! The Story of the Great Houdini by Sid Fleischman. HarperCollins/Greenwillow, 2006. An extra plus to this book is that Fleischman was himself a magician and so he is able to tell just enough of Houdini's secrets to make readers feel they have the inside track. Fleischman's own biography, *The Abracadabra Kid: A Writer's Life* (Greenwillow, 1996), makes a good companion read.

Fight On! Mary Church Terrell's Battle for Integration by Dennis Brindell Fradin and Judith Bloom Fradin. Clarion, 2003. Mollie Terrell, born to former slaves in 1863, went to Oberlin College and was the first black woman appointed to the Washington, D.C., Board of Education. When she was ninety years old, she won a Supreme Court case that ended segregation in the District of Columbia's restaurants and theaters.

Jane Addams: Champion of Democracy by Judith Bloom Fradin and Dennis Brindell Fradin. Clarion, 2006. The Fradins are being praised for the way they "humanize" Addams while also putting her advocacy for the poor into physical and historical contexts. The book could serve as a research model for high school students.

John Lennon: All I Want Is the Truth by Elizabeth Partridge. Viking, 2005. For this handsomely put-together biography, Partridge relies on Lennon's own writings and interviews.

While not censoring out the sordid details of Lennon's life with and without the Beatles, Partridge keeps her focus on the music.

Old Hickory: Andrew Jackson and the American People by Albert Marrin. Dutton, 2004. In his usual style, Marrin does more than introduce readers to an individual. He uses the person as a hook on which to hang the whole historical period of the American Industrial Revolution and the railroads.

Onward: A Photobiography of African-American Polar Explorer Matthew Henson by Dolores Johnson. National Geographic, 2005. Henson was hired to go on Robert E. Peary's trip to the North Pole as Peary's manservant, but he became much more than that as the group faced terrifying conditions. He was posthumously awarded the National Geographic Society's Hubbard Medal.

Our Eleanor: A Scrapbook Look at Eleanor Roosevelt's Remarkable Life by Candace Fleming. S&S/Atheneum, 2005. Fleming's biography is similar in style to Russell Freedman's photobiography and is designed to inspire feelings of intimacy that are usually reserved for family scrapbooks.

Rachel Carson by Ellen Levine. Viking, 2007. Part of the Up Close Series, Levine does a good job of introducing Carson as a person readers would like to know as well as telling about her work, which many people credit with starting the environmental movement.

The Voice That Challenged a Nation: Marian Anderson and the Struggle for Equal Rights by Russell Freedman. Clarion, 2004. In his usual style, Russell Freedman creates a beautifully designed and well-told biography of the talented singer who became a star in the political as well as the entertainment world.

The Wright Sister: Katharine Wright and Her Famous Brothers by Richard Maurer. Millbrook/Roaring Brook, 2003. Maurer tells the story of the woman sometimes called "the third member of the team," but she also had accomplishments apart from her brothers' flying.

A useful website for background information is *Almanac Biography*, www.infoplease.com/people.html, which includes information on 30,000 people organized into ethnic, career, and social and cultural groups.



Focus Box 9.5

Information about Bodies and Minds

Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: Responding to the Challenge of Online Social Aggression, Threats, and Distress by Nancy E. Willard. Research Press, 2007. An especially interesting part of this is the kinds of rationalizations that kids use to justify various types of cyberbullying. The book is written for adults, but could certainly be shared with sophisticated students who are probably going to be the ones to solve the problem.

Eating Disorders Information for Teens edited by Sandra Augustyn Lawton. Teen Health, Omnigraphics, 2005. Chapters alternate between narrative overviews covering causes, symptoms, preventions, and treatments of different problems. Quick tips, FAQ, and "Remember!" boxes give direct advice.

For Teens Only: Quotes, Notes, and Advice You Can Use by Carol Weston. HarperTrophy, 2003. Each page starts with an intriguing quote from people as different as Homer Simpson and Edna St. Vincent Millay. Weston expounds on the quotes and concludes with a boldfaced moral, almost like those at the ends of fables. She did an earlier book, *Private and Personal: Questions and Answers for Girls Only* (HarperTrophy, 2000), based on letters and answers in her Help column in *Girls' Life*.

The Girls' Guide to Friends by Julie Taylor. Three Rivers Press, 2002. The subtitle is "Straight talk on making close

pals, creating lasting ties, and being an all-around great friend." For older readers, Taylor wrote *The Girls' Guide to Guys: Straight Talk for Teens on Flirting, Dating, Breaking Up, Making Up and Finding True Love* (Three Rivers Press, 2000).

Inside Out: Portrait of an Eating Disorder written and illustrated by Nadia Shivack. S&S/Atheneum, 2007. Shivack named her eating disorder Ed, and over the years she kept track of Ed on whatever scraps of paper she could find. These are worked into the book, along with hindsight comments, websites, and lists of resources.

Is It a Choice? Answers to 300 of the Most Frequently Asked Questions about Gays and Lesbians, 3rd edition, by Eric Marcus. HarperCollins, 2005. Questions range from what to call same-sex parents to how people know if they are gay. Dating, telling parents, socializing, and political activism are all treated.

It's Okay to Say No: Choosing Sexual Abstinence by Eleanor Ayer. Rosen, 1997. Both physical and emotional health are touted as benefits of abstinence. While the message fits in with many religious teachings, the author does not focus on religion but instead on self-respect and preparing for a healthy marriage.

The Latina's Bible: The Nueva Latina's Guide to Love, Spirituality, Family, and La Vida by Sandra Guzman. Three

Rivers Press, 2002. One of the interesting facts presented in Guzman's book is that, according to 2000–2001 statistics, 30 percent of U.S. Latinas are under the age of fifteen and the median age for Latinos as a whole is 25.9 years. While there is a wealth of information here, at least one of our Latina students was offended by what she viewed as overgeneralizations about sexual beliefs and practices.

101 Questions about Sex and Sexuality: With Answers for the Curious, Cautious, and Confused by Faith Hickman Brynie. 21st Century Books, 2003. While emphasizing that abstinence is the only sure way to avoid STDs and pregnancies, Brynie also provides contraceptive information. The questions were collected from middle school and high school students.

The Sibling Slam Book edited by Don Meyer. Woodbine, 2005. Eighty-one young people offer insights from having grown up in a family with a special needs child. The focused chapters reveal not only feelings of embarrassment, but also of protectiveness and of pride because of learning things that other kids don't know and of making a real contribution to one's family.

Stay Strong: Simple Life Lessons for Teens by Terrie Williams with an introduction by Queen Latifah. Scholastic, 2001. Chapters include "Life Isn't Fair and Nothing You Do Matters," "How I Talk Is My Business," and "It's the 'In-Crowd' That Matters."

Staying Safe on Dates by Donna Chalet. Rosen, 1996.

Chalet's goal is to help girls, starting with those in middle school, develop safety skills. She shows girls the wisdom of setting and maintaining verbal, emotional, and physical boundaries.

Teen Fathers Today by Ted Gottfried. 21st Century Books, 2001. At last here is a book that acknowledges the contradictory feelings, the long-term implications, and the complexities of dealing with the baby's grandparents (both paternal and maternal). Contrary to the common notion that boys who father teen babies are interested only in casual sex, studies show that many have a continuing relationship with both the mother and the baby.

Teen Pregnancy, edited by Myra H. Immeli. Gale/Greenhaven, 2001. Pregnant teens, health-care workers, educators, and professional writers for scientific journals are among the contributors to this book, which works well for both skimming and reading.

The "What's Happening to My Body?" Book for Boys and **The "What's Happening to My Body?" Book for Girls** by Lynda Madaras with Area Madaras. Newmarket, 2000. The prefaces encourage parents by giving them tips on how to talk to preteens and teens about their developing bodies and their changing emotions. These books are accessible to middle schoolers, while still acceptable to high schoolers. An especially good section in the book for girls talks about dealing with the kind of unwanted attention that is often given to girls who develop early.