
Horace—Misinterpreted

Lois Winkel

Whether or not children's literature is perceived in the mainstream of literature has been, is, and will be debated recurrently. What is less often debated and indeed, I sometimes feel, barely considered is the role of nonfiction as part of the corpus of children's literature. Even rudimentary analysis of standard textbooks in the field reveals that informational materials, which comprise almost half the total number of children's books published¹ are treated briefly when placed against the various genres of fiction. Most readers about children's literature, as witness the recent *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature*,² do not even identify nonfiction as one of the "territories" to be considered. Within recent memory only one title, *Beyond Fact*,³ has addressed aspects of information books for professionals working with children.

This state of affairs could be understood if information books were ignored by children. But they are not. Children may not focus on a single title or a single author as they do in fiction;⁴ however, nonfiction does circulate aside from school assignments, particularly when the young people are aware of the full range of titles. The problem is often that just as nonfiction is given short shrift in the literature about children's literature, so too is it given little advocacy in terms of programming.

I had often wondered why this attitude prevailed and believe I found the answer while reading *DC&: Dewey Decimal Classification Additions Notes and Decisions*. In explaining the criteria used for distinguishing between historical fiction and history when classifying books for children, "Horace's dictum that the purpose of literature is 'docere et delectare'—to instruct and delight" was cited.⁵ This statement was then extrapolated to mean that books which inform are intended "to delight only fortuitously."⁶ The essential implication, that learning is not enjoyable, probably underlies the general attitude that nonfiction is not read for enjoyment. I find both premises disturbing and unsupported by reality.

In every area of activity, personal interest is probably the prime motivating factor. Young peo-

ple, initially, cannot be expected to be aware of the full range of materials available to them. It is the responsibility of the professional to present the full spectrum of titles. If this is done regularly, young people are then given the opportunity to select their reading material from a broader variety of styles and subjects. Children who want to find out about the knowledges that have been gained over the course of civilization deserve to know that that interest can be satisfied. Furthermore, it is important that reading interests which focus on or include nonfiction be viewed as valid interests.

Boys consistently demonstrate more interest in reading informational materials. This pattern continues into adulthood, though the subjects may differ. Generally males are considered to be less skilled and less active readers than females. It may be that the minimal inclusion of nonfiction commonplace in the majority of reading guidance programs and activities has essentially disenfranchised many readers before they ever get started.

I have to work at being creative. In programming I have two cardinal rules: *avoid being boring* and *entice rather than overload*. In trying not to bore young people I also try not to bore *me*. Thus approaches and styles of programs vary. Displays with accompanying bibliographies, interdisciplinary book talks, book talks on discrete themes, activity programs, and reading aloud are all proven, useful approaches. Certainly others as diverse as puppet shows, debates, flannel board presentations, and contests can be used. When preparing booklists, which I consider a virtual requirement for displays, book talks, and activity programs, past experience has shown that it is important to include the call number and a short description of the book. Experiment with folding the paperstock in different ways, and if possible use color. In avoiding overload, I prefer to sketch lightly and pique curiosity rather than subject my audience to an extended discourse. Young people tune out even faster than adults, and with the time restrictions bearing down on all of us, I try to gear my presentations to a maximum of fifteen minutes.

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The programs and activities outlined below bring nonfiction into the mainstream. The materials are versatile; flexible, and very often downright fun. It is not very difficult to find titles that can be used effectively in programming. Constructing programs that involve nonfiction may require more time initially until the presenter is as familiar with the corpus of nonfiction as he or she may be with fiction. The reward is worth the effort. Seeing hitherto reluctant readers become excited about books and seeing others branch out into new areas simply reinforces my belief that learning can be a delight.

Display with accompanying bibliography

The 600s Mean Action

Charlie Brown's Fifth Super Book of Questions and Answers ... About All Kinds of Things and What They Do. By Charles M. Schulz.

Zippers, escalators, popguns, fire extinguishers, and more are among the numerous mechanical items explained in text, drawings, and photographs by the Peanuts gang. (600)

Bodies. By Barbara Brenner. Illus. by George Ancona.

Size and shape don't matter—bodies work the same way. (611)

Tool Book. By Gail Gibbons.

Groups tools for building and many other kinds of work by use. (621.9)

Weight and Weightlessness. By Franklyn M. Branley. Illus. by Graham Booth.

Traveling into space does not affect your ability to stay down! (629.4)

Your First Garden Book. By Marc Tolon Brown.

Grow your pumpkins, potatoes, sunflowers and more; indoors, outdoors; in the ground, containers, or sponges. (635)

Popcorn Book. By Tomie dePaola.

Make the popular snack while learning its history. (641.6)

Codes for Kids. By Burton Albert, Jr.

Send secret messages twenty-nine different ways. (652)



Bulletin board displays with accompanying bibliographies can be used to highlight nonfiction books for children. (Photo by Karen Perry.)

Oil, the Buried Treasure. By Roma Gans.

Tapping deep into the earth can bring forth a gusher. (665.5)

How Things Are Made. National Geographic Society.

Ever wonder how the twists get on licorice? (670)

Amusement Park Machines. By Christine Hahn.

Some machines are built just for fun. (688.7)

Apartment House Close Up. By Peter Schaaf.

Photographs let you see what's inside an apartment house. (690)

This approach, which explores a sample of titles included within a Dewey classification, serves to introduce the subject facets contained within the area. It is an effective mechanism for promoting browsing. Almost any other classification lends itself to the same treatment.

Interdisciplinary booktalks

Prejudice

Bunnacula. By Deborah and James Howe.

Harold and Chester try to tell their people that the sweet rabbit is really a vampire. (Fic)

A Child in Prison Camp. By Takashima.

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, Japanese in the United States and Canada were ordered to leave their homes and businesses and go into internment camps. (940.54)

Creepy Crawly Things. National Geographic Society.

Lizards, caterpillars, insects, snakes, don't have many friends. (598.1)

Cricket in Times Square. By George Selden.

"Ugh" said Mamma, "Bugs are dirty—you can't bring it into the house." (Fic)

Diary of a Young Girl. By Anne Frank.

Two families hid from the Nazis. (940.54)

Half-Breed. By Evelyn Lampman.

What happens when you don't fit in anywhere? (Fic)

I Am the Darker Brother. By Arnold Adoff.

Name calling hurts. (811.08)

Logic. By Vicki Cobb.

Is faulty reasoning tripping up your thinking? (160)

Mr. Marley's Main Street Confectionary. By John J. Loeper.

Most people have a prejudice for sweets. (641)

Queeny Peavy. By Robert Burch.

Queeny gets teased by her classmates because her father is in jail. (Fic)

Sing Down the Moon. By Scott O'Dell.

The Cherokees were forced to walk the Trail of Tears. (Fic)

Spider Magic. By Dorothy Hinshaw Patent.

Miss Muffet screamed when the spider sat down beside her. Maybe you'll scream when you look at these. (595.4)

The Thing at the Foot of the Bed. By Maria Leach.

Most everyone agrees it is all right to be afraid of ghosts.

The Upstairs Room. By Johann Reiss.

Two sisters had to hide in a room just because of their religion.

What's Wrong with Being a Skunk. By Miriam Schlein.

Skunks have smelly reputations. (599)

Wind Song. By Carl Sandburg.

Some people just don't like math. (811)

Other interdisciplinary themes can be

A Matter of Time can be interpreted to include a combination of history, recipes, sports, seasons, etc.

Abacadabra can be interpreted to include a combination of magic tales, tricks, optical illusions, kitchen chemistry.

Romance can be interpreted to include a combination of folklore, mythology, biographies of scientists, accounts of explorations, e.g., Kon Tikki or the discovery of King Tut's tomb, accounts of achievements, e.g., the building of the Brooklyn Bridge, etc.

Communicating can be interpreted to include a combination relating to signs, the various media, sign language, foreign languages, body language, art, music, etc.

A Sense of ... can be interpreted to include the five senses and factors that affect senses e.g. crafts, recipes, sound, music, art; emotions and factors that affect them.

In broad interdisciplinary themes, the object is to select titles that present the theme in different or tangential perspectives. What is sought is the extension of the audience's way of looking at a topic.

Discrete themes incorporating nonfiction

Pets

What Has Ten Legs and Eats Cornflakes? By Ron Roy.

Hermit crabs, chameleons, and gerbils don't seem to have much in common. (636.08)

Pets in a Jar. By Seymour Simon.

How to catch, house, and care for a variety of small critters from snails to hydras. (636.08)

Great Aquarium Book. By Jane Sarnoff and Reynold Ruffins.

"The putting-it-together guide" that really works. (639.3)

King of the Cats. By Joseph Jacobs.

The elderly gravedigger and his wife are astounded when their cat listens most attentively to his strange tale. (398.2)

Pinkerton, Behave. By Steven Kellogg.

The outsized Great Dane pup has his own ideas as to what fetch, come, and burglar mean. (Easy)

Henry Huggins. By Beverly Cleary.

Persistently followed by a stray dog, Henry succumbs and tries to get home on the bus with the dog in what must be one of the funniest chapters ever written. (Fic)

The Incredible Journey. By Sheila Burnford.

Determined to return to their home, two dogs and a cat brave innumerable dangers as they travel through 250 miles of Canadian wilderness. (Fic)

Use biographical, folklore, poetry, song and craft indices to expand the themes beyond fiction and the predominant Dewey classification.

Activity programs

Easy to Make Spaceships That Really Fly. By Mary Blocksma and Dewey Blocksma.

Combine paper plates, cups, tape, straws, and glue and end up with a Zip Ship, a Window Zinger, a Double Decker, a Zoom-a-rang. Use the resulting ships in a flinging, pitching, flying contest; for display; or enter in a science fair. (629.47)

The Quicksand Book. By Tomie dePaola.

A bucket of sand and a water supply are all that's needed to make the suctioning stuff. Of course best to do outdoors on a hot day while garbed appropriately, but the "recipe" really works and young people adore it. (552)

Eat the Fruit, Plant the Seed. By Millicent Selsam. Photos by Jerome Wexler.

Enjoy eating a pineapple, avocado, or other fruit then use the seed to grow your own. (635)



Cleveland County Public Library staff members "dress the part" and use a display to focus attention on sports titles.

Lots of Rot. By Vicki Cobb.

A lemon dotted with blue, bread spotted with black, when examined under a magnifying glass or microscope yield fascinating glimpses into the world of molds. A perfect opportunity to make use of the unwanted growth found in most people's kitchens. (576)

Activity oriented programs can be initiated outside the 700s, as shown above. Titles in the 500s and 600s are excellent sources for programs and often require little in the way of purchased materials.



A pet show, such as this one sponsored by the Cumberland County Public Library, can provide a tie-in to books on pets and animals.

Read aloud programs

Advocating reading information books aloud usually results in a raised eyebrow reaction. Yet there is a significant corpus of titles whose style is sufficiently exciting to share with a group. On a personal note, I shall always treasure the memory of my then seven-year-old son reading Faith McNulty's *How to Dig a Hole to the Other Side of the World* aloud to his classmates and then inviting them to sift through a coal scuttle filled with sand containing samples of things found in the layers of the earth.

Some other information titles which are excellent to read aloud include

The Glorious Flight. By Alice and Martin Provensen.

Documents in witty stylistic prose and glorious illustrations Bleriot's attempts to design and fly an aircraft. (629.13)

Anno's Medieval World. By Mitsumasa Anno.

Lavish illustrations subtly support the realization that the earth is round, not flat. (909.07)

Sugaring Time. By Kathryn Lasky. Photographs by Christopher G. Knight.

Poetic prose and spellbinding black-and-white photographs follow the Lacey's as they break out the trails, drill the two hundred holes, hammer the spouts, hang the buckets and wait for the maple sap to rise. (633.6)

The Cat's Elbow. Collected by Alvin Schwartz. Pictures by Margot Zemach.

See if you can keep a straight face while reading "The Bicious Vull" in Medical Greek or the other amusements told in any of the thirteen trick languages presented in this fascinating volume. (652)

Most of the information books I choose to read aloud are well illustrated and reflect the author's excitement with the subject matter.

The infinitely rich variety of subject matter and forms of presentation show that information books have a rightful place in programming. It is important for us to imply to young people that learning is an intrinsic delight. Using nonfiction as read-alouds, in book talks, as sources for activities, and as displays provides the needed stimulus and encouragement.

References

1. Count of titles received in the editorial offices of *The Elementary School Library Collection* in a six-months period.
2. Robert Bator, ed., *Signposts to Criticism of Children's Literature* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1983).
3. Jo Carr, ed., *Beyond Fact: Nonfiction for Children and Young People* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1982)
4. "Chosen by Children," *Booklist* 79 (December 1, 1982): 507.
5. *DC&4* (Winter 1983), 16.
6. *Ibid.*