



Some Teens Prefer the Real Thing: The Case for Young Adult Nonfiction

Ed Sullivan

The English Journal, Vol. 90, No. 3, The Lure of Young Adult Literature. (Jan., 2001), pp. 43-47.

Stable URL:

<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0013-8274%28200101%2990%3A3%3C43%3ASTPTRT%3E2.0.CO%3B2-D>

The English Journal is currently published by National Council of Teachers of English.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/journals/ncte.html>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Some Teens Prefer the Real Thing: The Case for Young Adult Nonfiction

ED SULLIVAN

Nonfiction just doesn't get any respect from librarians and teachers. That's what I have observed working as a young adult librarian with teenagers and their teachers. Middle and high school students come into the public library with reading lists assigned by their English teachers, and nowhere, among dozens of choices, is there a single nonfiction title. On those rare occasions when a student does come in with a more inclusive list, it is still disproportionately skewed toward fiction. When I visit English classes in the schools, I notice that all the class sets are novels. On the shelves of paperbacks teachers have for self-

selected reading, there are few, if any, nonfiction titles. Why is it that so many educators do not hold nonfiction in high regard? Why this tendency to be "fictioncentric"? When librarians and teachers think of literature, they typically think of fiction. Penny Colman, a distinguished author of many nonfiction books for young adults, laments how many librarians and teachers have told her that reading nonfiction is not "real reading" (215). Unfortunately, many educators think of nonfiction as informational—something to be used for homework assignments.

In reviews of nonfiction books, I consistently see reviewers commenting upon the author's thoroughness in addressing the subject, the organization and layout of the information, the ease with which the information is accessible, whether there is a glossary and index, and other observations about the book's overall usefulness. Rarely does a nonfiction review go beyond the superficial and offer commentary on the aesthetic qualities of the book: the author's ability to craft an engaging narrative; its structure, point of view, pace, tone, voice, and so on.

Because nonfiction is usually regarded in purely utilitarian terms, it does not seem to occur to some educators that a nonfiction work can simply be a "good read"—something entertaining, fun, enjoyable, or just plain interesting. Wow, what a con-

cept—reading nonfiction for pleasure! Carter and Abrahamson note, "Much of the nonfiction read by young adults is read for pleasure, diversion, and entertainment" (8). Yes, many young adults do actually prefer to read such books. I preferred reading nonfiction as a teen and still do as an adult. Discussing two reading studies in 1972 and 1973, Carter and Abrahamson state, "Nonfiction becomes an increasingly important component in overall reading preferences as young adults mature" (4). English teachers should remember that nonfiction is the preferred reading choice of many of their students. Abrahamson and Carter also note in their study of reading preferences of young adults, "What we know is that young adults in the middle and high schools of America make nonfiction books a substantial part of their self-selected reading. . . . Educators must first of all recognize and reward the nonfiction reading that teens do just as they praise their reading of fiction" (167). Teachers can capitalize on this interest in nonfiction and get their students really excited about reading.

Colman believes there are at least three reasons why negative perceptions of nonfiction persist. The first is that, in the world of publishing for youth, the personal preferences of influential editors, educators, librarians, and reviewers of fiction have a

profound impact. The second is the romanticized image adults have of children's and young adult fiction. The third reason is Zena Sutherland's coining of the term *informational books* for nonfiction, which unfortunately caught on and continues to shape how people in education, librarianship, and publishing view the genre (216–17). Nonfiction is not just about information. The truth is that for many young adult readers nonfiction serves the same purposes as fiction does for other readers: it entertains, provides escape, sparks the imagination, and indulges curiosity. There's a lot more to a good nonfiction book than mere information.

Because nonfiction is usually
regarded in purely utilitarian terms,
it does not seem to occur to some
educators that a nonfiction work
can simply be a “good read”—
something entertaining, fun,
enjoyable, or just plain interesting.

One example of superior nonfiction is Jennifer Armstrong's *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*, winner of NCTE's 1998 Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction. Armstrong chronicles the ordeal of Sir Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated expedition to Antarctica aboard the *Endurance* in 1914. The explorer's goal was to be the first to cross the continent from sea to sea. The expedition was doomed to failure. Before reaching the continent, the ship became trapped in ice and was soon crushed to pieces. Shackleton and his crew were left stranded in the Antarctic wasteland for nineteen months, living in camps constructed from the ruins of their ship on ice floes. They would have to endure 200 mile per hour winds and temperatures well below zero. After five months of moving from one ice floe to another, Shackleton and his men made a daring, perilous escape in three tiny, open lifeboats, traveling hundreds of miles to the

uninhabited Elephant Island. From there, Shackleton and five crewmen left in one of the lifeboats on an 800 mile open boat journey through treacherous seas to reach South Georgia Island, where the only human inhabitants were the employees of a whaling station. Shackleton and his men reached the other side of the island safely, only to have to scale ice covered, uncharted mountains to reach the whaling station. It would be months more before the crew left behind on Elephant Island could be rescued. Miraculously, every member of the expedition survived.

This extraordinary, true story of adventure and survival is one that authors like Will Hobbs, Jack London, and Gary Paulsen could only begin to imagine in their fiction. More than an adventure story, *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* is a spellbinding, inspirational tale of extraordinary leadership and ingenuity; of the triumph of the human spirit in the face of overwhelming adversities; of camaraderie, devotion, and loyalty. Armstrong takes the facts of the event and weaves them into an engaging, enthralling human drama that is as rich in themes, conflicts, and memorable characters as any work of fiction. She achieves this by bringing a wonderful authenticity to the narrative through the frequent quotations of primary sources such as the log entries of Captain Frank Worsley and the personal accounts written by Shackleton and members of the expedition. Complementing the text are extraordinary photographs taken by expedition photographer Frank Hurley, who was able to chronicle the entire ordeal. Readers are treated to a stunning visual and written account. *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World* exemplifies all those qualities that make for outstanding nonfiction. It simply does not get any better. Regrettably, books like this are the exception rather than the rule in young adult nonfiction publishing these days.

Unfortunately, much poor quality nonfiction is being published that perpetuates the misconception that these books are just about information. Series publishers like Chelsea House, Enslow, Lucent, and Rosen are in the business of cranking out nonfiction in assembly-line fashion for school libraries and classrooms. What these publishers typically do is find a subject that they can milk for all it's worth, producing brief, superficial, poorly designed, cheaply made, and outrageously overpriced books. These types of series nonfiction books consistently feature awful cover designs, didactic and dull writing, unimaginative layout and design of text and illustra-

tions, and repetitive use of stock photographs that do little to complement the text. Information in these books is “dumbed down” for the reader in the same way that textbooks manage to strip facts down to the most unappealing presentation imaginable. These books may indeed inform the reader, often condescendingly, but they do nothing to engage the mind or spark the imagination. They certainly do not reflect a respect for their audience. They succeed only in reducing reading to a boring, laborious chore. It is not the concept of series to which I object. I do not agree that because a book is part of a series it cannot have quality and substance. The reality, however, is that many series books, particularly nonfiction series books, are too often substandard in quality and substance, and that libraries and schools are charged exorbitant amounts of money for these inferior products. It is these types of books that perpetuate the image of young adult nonfiction as only “informational”—books only to be used, not enjoyed.

Unfortunately, much poor quality
nonfiction is being published that
perpetuates the misconception
that these books are
just about information.

Another reason why teachers may not value nonfiction is because they may not understand how to use it with their students. Unrecognized is the potential nonfiction has to stimulate the analytical and critical thinking skills students use in reading fiction. Abrahamson and Carter observe that educators are uncomfortable with nonfiction because they do not know how to approach it. They note:

There are many reasons why educators do not value the nonfiction reading their students do as much as they value their fiction reading. Perhaps teachers and librarians unconsciously perpetuate a bias toward fiction because nonfiction was not stressed in their own course of study. (168)

Teachers know how to ask questions of fiction readers dealing with such elements as charac-

terization, conflict, point of view, setting, theme, and so on, but they are often at a loss as to what to do with nonfiction. In their book, *Nonfiction for Young Adults: From Delight to Wisdom*, Carter and Abrahamson suggest ten guidelines educators can use as a basis for designing strategies to elicit student responses about nonfiction:

1. How would this book be different if it had been written ten years earlier? Ten years later?
2. Which illustrations do you wish you had taken or drawn yourself? Why?
3. Compare this nonfiction book with another one written on the same topic. How do they differ? How are they alike? Which one do you like better (or believe more)? Why?
4. What segment, portion, or focus of this book would make a good documentary? Why?
5. What steps do you think the author followed to research and write this book?
6. How would this book be different if it had been written for a fourth grader?
7. What kind of teacher do you think the author would make?
8. If you had a chance to interview the authors of this book, what would you ask them?
9. Tell me three facts, theories, or incidents that you found particularly interesting. Now, assume you haven't read the book. Can you find this information? Why or why not?
10. Look at the title and the jacket of this book. What do they indicate the book will be about? Do they give a fair representation of the book's contents? (185–87)

Good nonfiction books are as rich in possibilities for deep, thoughtful discussion as any good novel.

There are a significant number of students who prefer “the real thing” for their reading. Teachers can incorporate a variety of nonfiction titles in reading lists to encourage students to make this genre a significant part of their self-selected reading diet. Abrahamson and Carter conclude, “What we know about teenagers and nonfiction, we’ve known for years: They read it, they find pleasure in it, and for many it is the literature that puts them on the path to lifetime reading” (170). It’s time for more English teachers to acknowledge this fact and start giving their students more opportunities to read nonfiction. It can be most enjoyable and meaningful to them.

Works Cited

Abrahamson, Richard F., and Betty Carter. "What We Know about Nonfiction and Young Adult Readers and What We Need to Do about It." *Inspiring Literacy: Literature for Children and Young Adults*. Eds. Sam Sebesta and Ken Donelson. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1993.

Armstrong, Jennifer. *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World*. New York: Crown, 1999.

Carter, Betty, and Richard F. Abrahamson. *Nonfiction for Young Adults: From Delight to Wisdom*. Phoenix, AZ: Oryx, 1990.

Colman, Penny. "Nonfiction Is Literature, Too." *The New Advocate* 12.3 (Summer 1999): 215-23.

ED SULLIVAN is the librarian for the Children's Defense Fund's Langston Hughes Library in Clinton, Tennessee.

APPENDIX: TWENTY-FIVE RECENTLY PUBLISHED OUTSTANDING NONFICTION TITLES FOR YOUNG ADULTS

Alexander, Caroline. *The Endurance: Shackleton's Legendary Antarctic Expedition*. New York: Knopf, 1999.

A superbly written account of Sir Ernest Shackleton's ill-fated expedition to the Antarctic aboard the *Endurance* in 1914. The text is abundantly illustrated, with crewmember Frank Hurley's astonishing photographs chronicling the ordeal. Recommended especially for high school grades.

Armstrong, Jennifer. *Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance*. New York: Crown, 1999.

Another beautifully illustrated, riveting account of the Shackleton expedition that is particularly well suited for middle school audiences.

Aronson, Marc. *Art Attack: A Short Cultural History of the Avant-Garde*. New York: Clarion, 1998.

An insightful, provocative, and completely engaging social history of the avant-garde movement that thoughtfully considers the forces within the historical context that this art was produced.

Colman, Penny. *Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997.

How people deal with death in different cultures and different times is documented through lively, fast-paced narrative and many contemporary and historical black-and-white photographs.

Dash, Joan. *We Shall Not Be Moved: The Women's Factory Strike of 1909*. New York: Scholastic, 1996.

A lively account of the terrible conditions, including the infamous Triangle Factory fire, that gave rise to the organized labor movement of women working in New York City's garment industry.

Farrell, Jeanette. *Invisible Enemies: Stories of Infectious Disease*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998.

An engrossing account of seven deadly diseases (AIDS, bubonic plague, cholera, leprosy, malaria, smallpox, and tuberculosis) that have ravaged humankind through the ages.

Freedman, Russell. *Martha Graham: A Dancer's Life*. New York: Clarion, 1998.

A gorgeously illustrated and lovingly written biography of the mother of modern dance.

Giblin, James Cross. *Charles A. Lindbergh: A Human Hero*. New York: Clarion, 1997.

A highly readable, well-rounded account of the aviator's extraordinary and controversial life.

Giovanni, Nikki, ed. *Shimmy Shimmy Shimmy Like My Sister Kate: Looking at the Harlem Renaissance through Poems*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

A unique chronicle of the Harlem Renaissance threaded together by outstanding selections of poetry written during the period.

Jaffe, Steven H. *Who Were the Founding Fathers? Two Hundred Years of Reinventing American History*. New York: Henry Holt, 1996.

This lively, abundantly illustrated look at the endless debate over what is the soul of our nation brings American history dynamically to life.

Kerr, M. E. *Blood on the Forehead: What I Know about Writing*. New York: HarperCollins, 1998.

This pioneer of young adult literature offers readers insights into how authors get their ideas and craft successful stories.

Krakauer, Jon. *Into Thin Air: A Personal Account of the Mt. Everest Disaster*. New York: Villard, 1997.

A spellbinding account of the deadliest season in the history of Mt. Everest when nine people attempting to climb the mountain perished.

Lawlor, Laurie. *Where Will This Shoe Take You? A Walk through the History of Footwear*. New York: Walker, 1996.

The whats, whens, whys, and hows of footwear from woven bark to Air Jordans is presented in a lively, straightforward narrative complemented by lots of black-and-white illustrations.

Mack, Stan. *The Story of the Jews: A 4,000-Year Adventure*. New York: Villard, 1998.

Employing comic strips and a lot of humor, Mack offers an entertaining and informative pictorial journey through 4,000 years of Jewish history.

Marrin, Albert. *Terror of the Spanish Main: Sir Henry Morgan and His Buccaneers*. New York: Dutton, 1999.

A compelling history of New World buccaneers and Sir Henry Morgan, one of their famous leaders.

- Mastoon, Adam. *The Shared Heart: Portraits and Stories Celebrating Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Young People*. New York: Morrow, 1997.
- An outstanding collection of forty frank, open narratives and photographs of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young adults ranging in age from late teens to early twenties, telling what it is like to be bisexual and homosexual.
- McKissack, Patricia C., and Fredrick L. McKissack. *Young, Black, and Determined: A Biography of Lorraine Hansberry*. New York: Holiday House, 1998.
- An intense, involving chronicle of the life of the successful African American playwright. Attractively illustrated with many black-and-white photographs.
- Murphy, Jim. *Gone A-Whaling: The Lure of the Sea and the Hunt for the Great Whale*. New York: Clarion, 1998.
- The history of American whaling brought vividly to life through an engrossing narrative that is frequently drawn from firsthand accounts in diaries, letters, and journals of young men who signed on to whaling voyages.
- Nash, Gary B. *Forbidden Love: The Secret History of Mixed-Race America*. New York: Henry Holt, 1999.
- A fascinating history of racial ideologies and race relations in America from Colonial times to the present.
- Partridge, Elizabeth. *Restless Spirit: The Life and Work of Dorothea Lange*. New York: Viking, 1998.
- An exceptional biography of the influential photographer who chronicled such subjects as the living conditions of migrant workers, Japanese American internees, and rural poverty. Handsomely illustrated with many of Lange's stunning black-and-white photographs.
- Thomas, Jane Resh. *Behind the Mask: The Life of Queen Elizabeth I*. New York: Clarion, 1998.
- A beautifully designed, superbly written biography of Elizabeth I.
- Thomas, Velma Maia. *Lest We Forget: The Passage from Africa to Slavery and Emancipation*. New York: Crown, 1997.
- Featuring documents and photographs from the Black Holocaust Exhibit in Atlanta, this outstanding three-dimensional interactive book chronicles the enslavement of Africans in America.
- Ungerer, Tomi. *Tomi: A Childhood Under the Nazis*. Boulder, CO: Roberts Rinehart, 1998.
- Alsatian artist Tomi Ungerer offers an extraordinary personal look at what it was like to live under Nazi occupation. Complementing Ungerer's own words and images are dozens of rare artifacts and documents produced by the Nazi propaganda machine: children's books, decrees, pamphlets, photographs, postcards, posters, school textbooks, songbooks, and toys. The result is a stunning visual memoir, a kind of museum in a book.
- Wilson, Janet. *The Ingenious Mr. Peale: Painter, Patriot, and Man of Science*. New York: Atheneum, 1996.
- An exceptionally well-written, highly engaging account of the life of the fascinating Renaissance man, Charles Wilson Peale.
- Wooldridge, Susan G. *Poemcrazy: Freeing Your Life with Words*. New York: Potter, 1996.
- Much more than a manual on how to read and write a poem, Wooldridge's infectious, unbridled enthusiasm for poetry will inspire even the most devoted hater of poetry to start reading and writing verse.