



Informational books for young readers (from toddlers through teens) fall into three large groups:

- Textbooks
- Reference
- Narrative Nonfiction

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BUT . . . Is It True?

Moms and Dads, librarians and teachers have all heard a child ask: “Is it true?” The question can come when you are introducing a book to a child; after you’ve told a story, read aloud, or book-talked to a group; or after a child has read a book on her own. We all know *exactly* what the child is asking and that she wants a clear yes or no answer.

Sometimes we grown-ups are a little too clever for our own good and, especially if the book at hand is a work of fiction, we will cagily answer the question with another question: “Do *you* think it’s true?” Or we’ll say something much too complicated like: “The relationships are true; the feelings are true; the experiences are true.” Sometimes (poor kid!), we launch into a lesson on library classification: fiction and nonfiction.

But if the child is persistent enough (and, thankfully, most are), we’ll end up saying: “No this is a fiction book; the author imagined the story and wrote it down for us.” Or “Yes, this is nonfiction; it is factual.”

That is the clarity the child wants and needs. And, as long as we ignore a few categories—notably memoirs—it really is pretty much as black-and-white as that.

Classifications

We’ve come to calling nonfiction “informational books” these days. Since 2001, the Association of Library Service to Children of the American Library Association has given the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Award, “to the author(s) and illustrator(s) of the most distinguished informational book published in English during the preceding year.” I appreciate the difference in terms—it broadens the category of “true books.” Still, nonfiction or informational, the basic criteria for evaluation remains the same:

- Accuracy—verifiable accuracy—of the facts
- Age-appropriateness of the presentation: the inclusion of the right background and context to help readers make sense of the subject
- Illustrations (or maps, charts, graphs, etc.) that expand and further explain the text
- When appropriate, a list of source materials
- Excellence of literary qualities: style, voice, language, book design, etc.

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“If you promise not to get too mad, I’ll tell you a secret. I used to write textbooks. . . . I used to spend long days in the library, searching for stories to make my history textbooks fun to read. And I filled up notebooks with stories—funny, amazing, inspiring, surprising, and disgusting stories. But as you’ve probably noticed, textbooks are filled with charts, tables, lists, names, dates, review questions . . . there isn’t any room left for the good stuff..”

—STEVE SHEINKEN

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TEXTBOOKS

Textbooks hold an important place in the education of children, and they belong in this discussion because our children spend a good deal of time reading them. Textbooks fill the needs of teaching programs and provide school children with fundamentals. They are teaching tools, primarily, and most are not entertaining or engaging. Steve Sheinken, in his introductions to a couple of American history nonfiction titles—*King George: What Was His Problem?* and *Two Miserable Presidents* (Flash Point/Roaring Brook Press)—explains it well:

“If you promise not to get too mad, I’ll tell you a secret. I used to write textbooks. . . . I used to spend long days in the library, searching for stories to make my history textbooks fun to read. And I filled up notebooks with stories—funny, amazing, inspiring, surprising, and disgusting stories. But as you’ve probably noticed, textbooks are filled with charts, tables, lists, names, dates, review questions . . . there isn’t any room left for the good stuff..”

Textbooks just don’t have room for the interesting anecdote, for character development, for flavor.

REFERENCE

It used to be easy to talk about reference books. We all knew what they were. Encyclopedias, atlases, dictionaries—that mostly dry and dusty section of the library with books you couldn’t borrow. They were filled with everything it seemed—everything and anything you wanted to know, usually organized from A to Z. But, again, they weren’t entertaining or engaging. They sort of just “were.”

Then along came Dorling Kindersley and turned the category upside down with subject-specific books overflowing with information in pictures—eye-popping, digitally-enhanced, in-your-face images—and captions. Facts in bite-sized portions. Just the way kids liked it, apparently. The books were a hit.

Juvenile Reference Sales through Baker & Taylor: A Five-Year Analysis

The number of juvenile reference titles published each year, from 2003–2007, remains steady: between 200–250.* The median number of units sold per title over the first 6–18 months is most often around 100.

However, for titles published in 2007, tracking sales through June 2008, we note a sharp spike in the sales potential of a single title, as well as the number of blockbuster titles overall. In other years, it was rare for a top-selling title in this category to sell in excess of 5,000 units in the 18-month tracking period—only 2 titles exceeded 5,000 units in 2004–05, and none did so in 2003–04, 2005–06, or 2006–07.



By contrast, the unit sales through June 2008 for the top 6 juvenile reference titles published in 2007 are as follows:

<i>The Daring Book for Girls</i>	Collins	27,980
<i>The Girls' Book: How to Be the Best at Everything</i>	Scholastic	8,438
<i>The World Almanac for Kids 2008</i>	World Almanac Education	7,411
<i>The Boys' Book: How to Be the Best at Everything</i>	Scholastic	7,272
<i>Do Not Open</i>	DK Publishing	5,724
<i>Scholastic Children's Dictionary</i>	Scholastic Reference	5,391

The new-style reference book for children has the potential to transform the category. As more new titles follow suit in 2008, we may expect a larger number of top-sellers, as well as higher peaks in units sold.

Titles included for analysis are those identified by publishers in the BISAC category of Juvenile Nonfiction / Reference, including all subcategories. This does not capture all relevant titles. All sales figures acquired from Publisher Alley.

At about the same time, reference became the property of the Internet. Just type in your subject or your question and up pop about a zillion answers. We've talked and talked about why this isn't the best way for young people to do their research. Teachers, especially, have wrung their hands about how limited the learning is when children and teens do *only* this kind of research. We are agreed that the Internet should be part of the process. The problem is that for too many kids, it is the beginning and the end of the process.

The result of the relatively-new kind of reference publishing combined with the impact of the Internet on the kind of reference books available now is all over the shelves of bookstores, libraries, and kids' bedrooms. Today's reference books are thorough, up-to-date; handsome and inviting. Information is accessible through the organization of the book itself and/or through multiple and thorough indices. When reference books are done well, a young researcher will not only find a specific answer, but will be led on to other aspects of a subject, encouraged to ask new questions and to seek new information.

These books are made for browsing: for dipping in and out, allowing young readers to pick up a bit of information here, an odd fact there. They fit busy lives perfectly.

These new reference books also made "true books" available to our youngest children. There are almost wordless books about nature, for example, for toddlers. Kingfisher's *Animal Babies* series presents cuddly pictures of young animals in their natural environment—from grasslands to polar lands, from the house to the farm. With a turn of the page, toddlers discover the animal's mother, and through this family journey, children learn that dogs have puppies and bears have cubs. In Kingfisher's *Backyard Books*, the youngest scientists

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learn about the creatures in their own backyards—ants, butterflies, snails, and others. Pictures and brief text urge young readers to explore: the books present lots of facts mixed in with lots of fun.

Carefully created reference books are tailored to the specific age of the child readers, offering the right balance of illustration with text; the right vocabulary; the right amount of information. It's not just one encyclopedia fits all—but many reference books for each.

NARRATIVE NONFICTION

The heart of the matter for me is narrative nonfiction. Here readers get the truth *and* get the story. It's not just dates and formulas and maps and rules. It's all that integrated into a larger framework, so that it makes sense and makes readers care. It's not just about knowing; it's about understanding.

In narrative nonfiction, the reader hears the author's voice: someone is telling this story, someone who, from the get-go, has to earn the readers' trust. The author must demonstrate and s/he knows the subject and genuinely believes the readers will be interested in it. Then the author must find how to present the subject in a manner that will engage and involve young readers. How the facts are revealed is as important as the presentation of the facts themselves. Simon Basher gives middle school and high school readers the basic elements—with personality—in *The Periodic Table* (Kingfisher); in *Biology*, he makes the human body and its systems an understandable—and memorable—group of characters who work together to keep us ticking.

In narrative nonfiction, the author often has a point of view about the subject. The presentation should be balanced, yes, but it's okay if the author has an opinion, as long as s/he is upfront about that opinion. It's clear, for example, in Caldecott winner *The Man Who Walked Between the Towers* (Roaring Brook Press), that author-illustrator Mordicai Gerstein admires Philippe Pettit.

And in narrative nonfiction, the revelation of the story determines the organization of the information. Most narrative nonfiction is for reading through—not jumping in and out of the book, not looking up a single fact. Narrative nonfiction is one whole piece.

Just as with adults, nonfiction is often the genre of choice for young readers. It allows them to pursue an interest (Do you like dinosaurs? Are you curious about the American Revolution? Do you want to learn how to build a tree house?). It explains the way the world works and answers questions that may be yet unformed by the child-reader. It feeds the brain and the imagination, and when it's done well, it's as satisfying a reading experience as any fiction.

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Juvenile Narrative Nonfiction* Sales through Baker & Taylor: A Five-Year Analysis

Juvenile reference trends are largely repeated in narrative nonfiction, if less dramatically. Once again, for titles published from 2003–2007, we observe the following:

Number of narrative nonfiction titles published each year, though much higher than in reference, is still steady: roughly 6,000–7,000.

The median number of copies sold per title in this category is about 74.

The number of titles published in 2007 exceeding sales of 5,000 units over 6–18 months is double the average for the previous four years:

Publication Year	Titles Selling 5,000+ Units
2003	7
2004	4
2005	15
2006	9
Avg, 2003–2006	9
2007	18

The top-selling narrative nonfiction title sold between 14,000–17,500 units in 2003–04, 2004–05, 2005–06, and 2006–07. Among titles published in 2007, the top-selling title sold 43,175 units: an increase of 150%.

*Titles in this category were identified in Publisher Alley as follows: containing an LC (Library of Congress) subject category including “juvenile literature” AND assigned a primary BISAC category of Juvenile Nonfiction (all subcategories).

The category of informational books is steadily growing. No longer are we in the situation of there being only a couple of books for a child’s third-grade sports biography book report.

And, more places are buying nonfiction for children. It is no longer the exclusive property of libraries and classrooms. Informational books for kids are taking up increased space in bookstores, in consumer catalogs, on mass-retailer and supermarket shelves.

It’s often said that truth is stranger than fiction. Jean Fritz, a pioneer in writing biographies for elementary-school-aged readers added that it’s often funnier than fiction, too.

All that said: Nonfiction for children is hot. And that’s the truth!

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