Reviewing Nonfiction Books for Children and Young Adults: Stance, Scholarship, and Structure

INTRODUCTION

Both the writing and the reviewing of children's and young adult nonfiction are art forms. Fine works of nonfiction promise hours of pleasure, exhilaration, and contemplation for their readers; they convey both wonder and passion about a particular topic or theme; and, to paraphrase Robert Probst (1986), they feed a child's thinking rather than control it. At best, nonfiction books are characterized by beautifully written prose, definable themes, unifying structure, and stimulating subjects.

Likewise, so are fine reviews. They don't simply indicate a thumbs up/thumbs down recommendation, but instead impart a sense of the book as a whole, discuss what subject is covered as well as how it is presented, and suggest ways to extend a book and thus bring it to more readers. Reviews not only introduce specific titles to librarians, teachers, parents, and booksellers, who in turn share them with young people, but they also feed the profession's thinking about matters concerning the nature of literature.

Not surprisingly, the best reviewers are readers—readers who devour books rather than simply pick them up to satisfy the demands of their jobs; readers who surround themselves with books, and words, and ideas; and readers who want to share these passions with others. Frequently, though, their literary love affairs begin with the traditional triumvirate
of fiction, poetry, and drama, and it is that particular genre orientation that unconsciously affects the ways in which they interact with all subsequent books they encounter.

THE STATUS OF NONFICTION

Story is powerful. It has pulled many individuals into children's and young adult literature, and it remains an influential force in both professional and personal lives. From parable to allegory, fairy tale to novel, poem to play, and myth to narrative, story can challenge readers to face potent truths and perpetual themes that reflect the very essence of the human condition. With such a strong heritage, it's no wonder that these formats dominate both the professional literature and the review media.

Yet other equally respectable, if not respected, patterns appear in children's and young adult literature. That Brent Ashabranner (1989) chooses topical outline to honor the Vietnam War Memorial, or that Brenda Guiberson (1992) uses compare/contrast to introduce readers to Spoonbill Swamp, or that Hanna Machotka (1992) employs a series of questions and answers to arouse curiosity in the readers of Breathtaking Noses, must be recognized as different, rather than inferior, ways of organizing text material. Books featuring such non-narrative patterns as cause/effect, topical outline, and question/answer deserve respect. What the profession needs to ask itself is, "Do such books get the same consideration as do narrative accounts?"

To examine this question, I recently tallied the starred reviews, or those books of special distinction recommended for children and young adults, that appeared in Booklist, The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, The Horn Book Magazine, and School Library Journal from January 1991 through June 1992. During that period, 461 separate titles were starred; 110 of these books received stars from more than one journal. Of these starred reviews, 274, or 59.4%, were fiction titles, while 187, or 40.5%, were nonfiction.

Although the above distribution appears fairly even, notice what happens when 105 (of the 187) starred reviews for poetry, folklore, and biography are eliminated from the count. That leaves 82, or 17.7% of the total starred reviews, that can be defined as informational books. Of those 82, almost 20% are narrative nonfiction (having some form of story in it): books such as Ina Chang's (1991) A Separate Battle: Women and the Civil War, or Jill Krementz's (1992) How It Feels to Live with a Physical Disability, or Iris Van Rynbach's (1991) Everything from
a Nail to a Coffin, or Owen Beattie and John Geiger's (1992) Buried in Ice: The Mystery of a Lost Arctic Expedition contain strong narrative threads.

Fifteen years ago, Milton Meltzer, quoting Aidan Chambers on the status of nonfiction, wrote: "While it has not been completely ignored ... nonfiction 'does get brushed off and pushed to the back ... as though information books were socially inferior to the upper-crust stuff we call literature. ... We'd do better by children, and ourselves if we revised its accepted definition to include all that is published. ... Every book, no matter what its content and purpose, deserves and demands the respect and treatment—the skill and care—of art" (Meltzer, 1976, p. 19). The figures from the above exercise suggest that nonfiction may still get "pushed to the back," and that perhaps stories, narratives, biographies, poetry, and folklore enjoy the most favored genre status in our review journals. To negate this charge, responsible reviewers must ask themselves if they are, first of all, unconsciously responding positively to story narrative because they prefer that format, and, second, if they are slighting nonfiction because it does not mirror their personal reading preferences.

REVIEWING INFORMATIONAL BOOKS

Keep in mind, though, that no reviewer should praise mediocre titles just to even out these numbers. Some of the nonfiction that is published should understandably be "pushed to the back" of the literary shelf. Here one should find those books that merely assemble data on topics such as the states, inventions, or the solar system. Unfortunately, the weakest of these have precipitated the strongest professional bias against nonfiction: Informational books primarily exist to satisfy demands for assigned reports.

To make matters worse, these publications become a part of a self-fulfilling prophecy: More books are written to meet these requirements; research is designed to respond to available materials; and children, forced to engage in such meaningless activities, ultimately become the losers. Make no mistake, this circle is not the creation of reviewers; it is constructed by both educators and publishers. Reviewers, however, must refrain from feeding this publishing frenzy and must discontinue the practice of recommending books by discussing subject and simply adding the lone positive statement that they are "useful for school reports."

Why is the inclusion of this tag line so offensive? The combined weight of the sheer numbers of such books, and the frequency with which these volumes are recommended for school reports, not only
reinforce the utilitarian stereotype, but also may well stand in the way of librarians and teachers purchasing and recommending outstanding books that deviate from this assumed norm.

In addition, the assumption that a book will be "useful for school reports" typically rests on the premise that assignments consist of teacher-directed research that seeks solutions to finite, specific, and answerable questions. Certainly many projects do, but not all. School districts across the country are opening up student inquiry through I-searches (personal research), interdisciplinary projects, and community activities. Would the book typically recommended as "useful for school reports" help or hinder these students? In addition, does the repetition of such a comment eventually validate unimaginative projects that demand little more from the student than the ability to list the imports and exports of a particular country?

If not pejorative, "useful for school reports" certainly delivers faint praise. Of the 82 starred reviews of informational books, only 3 mentioned school assignments. In each case, "the school assignment" recommendation was tempered by noting the potential for recreational reading and browsing, or by suggesting that a resulting report would be both unusual and different. Such comments set up a double standard between fiction and nonfiction. Since less than successful novels are not recommended as appropriate titles for book reports, weak nonfiction books should not be suggested as fitting vehicles for research. Instead, reviewers will better serve their audience if they come clean about a book's strengths and weaknesses. If a book has a clear organizational structure, then comment on that; if the topics covered are logical components of the whole, then mention that feature; and if the index is accessible, then point it out. On the other hand, if a writer's style is uninspired and dry, alert both the review audience and the author, instead of excusing this limitation by sending the book to the research shelf. By concentrating on the features of a particular book, reviewers won't encourage the groundless assumption that nonfiction only satisfies school demands.

Reviewers can additionally dispel the book-correlates-with-report notion by suggesting alternative ways to introduce and extend those nonfiction volumes that treat topics and themes with both style and substance. In a recent interview for the ALAN Review, Sally Estes, editor of books for youth at Booklist, mentions that "They're [review journals] intended to keep readers up to date with what's new, what's good, and perhaps to suggest ways these books can be used with the target audience" (Carter, 1992, p. 52).

Hazel Rochman, assistant editor of books for youth at Booklist, suggests ways these books can be used with the target audience by recommending nonfiction for reading aloud, a practice not widely
Reviewing Nonfiction for Children

considered by many in the literary community (Carter & Abrahamson, 1991). In another departure from the norm, Rochman's (1991a, 1991b) recommended read-alouds frequently include non-narrative volumes such as Antler, Bear, Canoe: A Northwoods Alphabet Year (Bowen, 1991) or A Sea Full of Sharks (Maestro & Maestro, 1990). Similarly, Carolyn Phelan's (1992) review of Wonderful Pussy Willows (Wexler, 1992) lets teachers and librarians know that the book can be expanded by following the clear directions for growing pussy willows from seed or by grafting, while Ellen Fader's (1992) review of Dinosaurs to the Rescue!: A Guide to Protecting Our Planet (Brown & Brown, 1992) mentions that children can participate in improving the environment through projects, such as making milk carton bird feeders, which should easily find natural outlets in both classrooms and libraries.

CHILDREN AND NONFICTION

These suggestions, along with comments such as Kathryn Pierson Jennings' recommendation that On the Air (Hautzig, 1991) would be a likely candidate "for young non-fiction readers who 'just want a good book'" (Jennings, 1992, p. 181), underscore the premise that children do indeed find pleasure in nonfiction. Sometimes that pleasure comes from finding themselves within the pages of particular volumes, and sometimes that pleasure comes from the facts and information they take away from the books.

Readers can interact with books in one of two ways. They can either look for what they can experience through text, or they can concentrate on what they can take away from text. Lifetime readers, or those adults who regularly read books for both information and pleasure, write of the emotional involvement they experienced with books when they were children and young adults (Carlsen & Sherrill, 1988). Aliterate youth, on the other hand, express no connection with books at all. One junior high student summed up these feelings: "You open the book. You look at the words. You close the book. Big deal" (Beers, 1990, p. 136).

Consequently, librarians, teachers, and parents who wish to help children become lifetime readers try to recommend books that will trigger emotional responses. Many adults, coming from reading backgrounds dominated by fiction, assume that nonfiction, with its information and facts, provides the forum for taking information away from text, while fiction, with its characters and story line, supplies the vehicle for encountering experiences through text. This assumption defines the reader as a passive individual who simply follows the dictates of an author and implies that text ultimately determines a reader's stance.
In practice, readers define their own individual stances, and, like literary switch-hitters, frequently shift from one to another within a single text.

These are the children who open Robert C. O'Brien's (1971) *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH* and discover that NIMH is not a product of the author's imagination but the National Institute of Mental Health. Such readers take this and other specific information away from the novel. By the final chapter, however, these very readers often identify with both characters and story and find themselves vicariously involved in the action. They wonder if they would be brave enough to defend a noble idea as the rats did. Would they trade their creature comforts for a harsher, yet more honorable, life?

On the other side of the coin are those nonfiction readers of Seymour Simon's (1989) *Whales* who may learn that the heart of a blue whale is the size of a small car or that some whales dive to depths as great as a mile. Again, these youngsters will quickly alter their stances and engage in personal responses by wondering what it would be like if they were to see or photograph or swim with a whale. Neither author nor literary form has dictated these responses; the individual readers have.

Other readers choose not to find their identification, and thus their pleasure and information, vicariously. These children seek active participation from books. They are the youngsters who may tune out Russell Freedman's (1987) well-crafted descriptions of Lincoln's tortured soul in *Lincoln: A Photobiography*, but see the physical results of our 16th president's blackest hours in the deep facial lines they try to re-create when using Lee J. Ames' (1978) *Draw 50 Famous Faces* to sketch his portrait. Their personal stances will come through literature, not by identifying with a character, but rather by engaging in text and actively creating meaning as they physically respond to this popular informational book. Adults must recognize and support such individual literary choices.

Consider a recent ethnographic study conducted by Kylene Beers (1990) that examined aliterate junior high students. Beers spent months in the classroom observing and talking to those young adults who are able to read but chose not to. What she found was that even these uncommitted and unmotivated students did read something; they read nonfiction. But, said one aliterate student, "I don't think the teacher would call what I'm doing reading" (Beers, 1990, p. 167).

Unfortunately, what many youngsters have learned is that according to many adults, fiction is reading; nonfiction is not. By publicly recognizing that nonfiction readers will find pleasure and create meaning with the books they choose, reviewers can help break this stereotype.
DOCUMENTATION IN NONFICTION

Without a doubt, reviewers can effect change in the profession. In 1986 Hazel Rochman questioned authors and publishers who did not include documentation in their nonfiction offerings. Prior to this discussion, few nonfiction books contained complete documentation, or author’s notes, acknowledgments, text referencing, footnotes, and/or bibliographies (Rochman, 1986).

Yet, three years later, when Dick Abrahamson and I interviewed seven authors for our book Nonfiction for Young Adults: From Delight to Wisdom (Carter & Abrahamson, 1990), we discovered that each clearly wrestled with this issue, and the impetus to do so came from reviewers. As Brent Ashabranner told us:

I have benefited from reviews. I am happy to say that most of the reviews of my books have been favorable, but occasionally a reviewer points out something that helps me in future books. For example, I learned early on that reviewers of books for teenage readers take documentation of what the writer says very seriously. I wasn’t paying sufficient attention to documentation, and after the first book or two that I wrote, I’ve been much more careful about letting my readers know where I got my information. I put it into the text in a way that doesn’t interfere with the prose but assures the reader that I didn’t just make things up. I’ve been much more careful with my bibliographies. Thoughtful reviews help me be a better writer. (Carter & Abrahamson, 1990, p. 101)

In a similar interview, Milton Meltzer shares the reasons for his resistance to source notes:

I think bibliographies are very important. Recently I have been including annotated bibliographies, organized by subjects covered in the text. This helps give the young reader an indication of the nature of the book, what it’s about, and ought to be more valuable than just the listing of titles. I also indicate which reference books may be the most useful to them. Now, on the issue of footnotes, there is a difference of opinion. Hazel Rochman, at Booklist, thinks that the text itself should have footnotes, either at the back of the book or at the bottom of each page. I suspect a great many young readers would be put off by all these notes. I try to refer, within the text, to the source of important statements or facts and to indicate whether something is disputed. But I don’t provide scholarly footnotes for young readers. All sources—books, magazines, newspapers, journals—will be in the bibliography. If I were to put footnotes into my books there might be as many as ten or fifteen on every single page. (Carter & Abrahamson, 1990, p. 54)

This interview doesn’t contain Meltzer’s last word on the subject. His most recent release, The Amazing Potato, includes an informal, yet informative, discussion of sources in chapter by chapter notes appended to the text. Neither dry nor pedantic, these source notes underscore Meltzer’s scholarship and acknowledge that some of his readers may well want to explore related subjects on their own (Meltzer, 1992).
Nonfiction will frequently act as the agent that brings a child and a particular subject or field of study together. That's how James Jensen, or Dinosaur Jim, was introduced to his life-long dream. Jensen writes: "My father bought a used geology textbook, and in the back of it were pictures of dinosaurs. While some boys dreamed of a new bicycle, I dreamed of finding dinosaurs. I would always wake up before I could dig them up. I never did have a bicycle, but I've never stopped dreaming of dinosaurs" (Wilford, 1985, p. 8).

Similarly, Richard Wright discovered his life's work through nonfiction. In his case, it was the essays of H. L. Mencken. In Black Boy he comments: "Yes, this man was fighting, fighting with words. He was using words as a weapon, using them as one would use a club. Could words be weapons? Well, yes, for here they were. Then, maybe, perhaps, I could use them as a weapon?" (Wright, 1945, p. 272).

And Pulitzer Prize winner Annie Dillard writes of being a teenager and being given a book on plants. She read the words, thought about the images, and performed some of the simple experiments. Dillard concludes her memory with these powerful words: "I had a life" (Dillard, 1987, p. 149).

As Hazel Rochman points out, shoddy or nonexistent documentation delivers a disturbing message from authors to readers: "Trust me. I've looked at the evidence, and I'll tell you" (Rochman, 1986, p. 639). This attitude reflects the antithesis of critical reading skills—never to accept unquestionably what is in print, always to check statistics and sources, and to think independently—that form the core of respected school curricula. Professional educators cannot develop critical thinkers or budding scientists, writers, and historians if the raw materials they use encourage passivity.

In addition, the inclusion of specific attribution lets readers know that research happens before writing begins. Youngsters who are asked to write assume that adult authors are either born knowing the information they share in books or that they acquire that information through exotic life experiences. The perpetual advice, "Write about something you know," is repeated in classrooms across the country. But this recommendation proves futile unless children and young adults encounter models for acquiring that information. If these readers never see examples of an author's research, then the inevitable conclusion—that they can't begin to write because they just don't possess enough information—appears perfectly logical.

Even the youngest of writers will find models for their personal publications in the books they read. First-grade authors regularly include title pages, tables of contents, and chapters in their own books since they view these elements as integral parts of a reputable whole. Likewise, these youngsters will also put acknowledgments, an author's note, and
even bibliographical information in their own writing if they've also encountered these features. Authors do more than impart information to children. The books youngsters read become literary role models for their own writing and inquiry.

Still, the argument persists that footnotes and bibliographies are off-putting to children, and that young readers will not pick up books that include such features. The problem here is that we simply don't know whether or not this assumption is valid. It may be another one of those self-fulfilling prophecies that sustain themselves in the nonfiction world: Books are published without documentation, children read those books, so more books are published without evidence of scholarship. Until researchers examine this notion, publishers should err on the side of accuracy by including acknowledgments, bibliographies, and specific citations. If such documentation is appended, then readers may choose to explore or ignore it.

Fine nonfiction, as Aidan Chambers said, deserves "the respect and treatment—the skill and care—of art" (Meltzer, 1976, p. 19). The diverse writings of Sir Francis Bacon, John Locke, Abraham Lincoln, Loren Eisley, Jane Addams, Joseph Brunner, Stephen Hawking, and Barbara Tuchman have not only recorded the human experience, but they've also defined it. From Thomas Paine's Common Sense to Albert Einstein's $E = mc^2$ to Carl Sagan's Cosmos to Martin Luther King Jr.'s Letter from a Birmingham Jail to John F. Kennedy's Profiles in Courage to Betty Friedan's Feminine Mystique to John L. Soule's plea to go west, nonfiction—with its stirring language, its compelling subjects, and its impressive abilities to provoke thought and challenge beliefs—has shaped philosophies, societies, and individuals.

**STYLE AND STRUCTURE**

While juvenile nonfiction doesn't have the global impact of its adult counterpart, it does frequently challenge and inspire many of its young readers. Sometimes this stimulation comes through an interesting subject. Often it doesn't. The genius of Jim Giblin (1987), for example, is that he can turn a discussion of knives, forks, and spoons into a social commentary that challenges readers to think about previously unrelated topics from technology, history, and culture. Giblin's control over both style and structure makes this possible.

Good reviewers discuss style. They note the clarity with which Russell Freedman (1991) discusses lift in The Wright Brothers, they point out Seymour Simon's (1990) ability to explain the tidal pull in Oceans, and they frequently excerpt portions of text to back up their opinions. Less frequently though, do reviewers comment on structure.
Specific facts and opinions represent what the author wants to offer the reader; structure determines how the author wants the reader to think about that subject. Brent Ashabranner admits that finding an appropriate "structure may take him almost as long to locate as the actual writing takes" (Ashabranner, 1988, p. 751). Similarly, Jean Fritz reiterates the importance of structure when she writes: "The art of fiction is making up facts; the art of nonfiction is using facts to make up a form" (Fritz, 1988, p. 759).

Unlike style, which meshes with subject, structure controls subject. Readers of Lisa Westberg Peters' The Sun, the Wind and the Rain, for example, consider the evolution of a mountain not as a historical process, but as an event that parallels a young girl building a sand mountain at the beach. Peters (1990) sets up the compare/contrast structure with the opening sentence: "This is the story of two mountains. The earth made one. Elizabeth in her yellow sun hat made the other" (p. 1).

Mature readers look for such organizational patterns and structure their reading and their thinking around them. When reading a chronological history, for example, they key in on those reported events that happened first, then second, and then third. They are thus able to eliminate asides and appositives that have little relationship to the whole while retaining more crucial information within a familiar perceptual frame. When reading John Langone's (1992) Our Endangered Earth, for instance, readers will expect to encounter a solution after reading about a problem, and another problem after reading the previous solution. And those readers of Ken Robbins' (1990) A Flower Grows expect to continue with his sequential progression until the end of the book. Consequently, these readers begin to anticipate what will happen next rather than look for a tangential discussion of parallel events.

Patterns such as enumeration, sequence, cause/effect, and compare/contrast not only control subject in a book, but they also provide youngsters with models for organizing information. This is the language of grown-ups. The profession's infatuation with narrative, even narrative in nonfiction, may result in many outstanding works, but it may not be an unmitigated good. As Linda Levistik comments, "History is more than narrative. It is also learning to sift evidence before it has been shaped and interpreted" (Levistik, 1992, p. 13). To help children sift through evidence, librarians and teachers need to provide books on a variety of topics presented with a variety of structures. They will discover these books through the review media.

Enumeration, or topical outline, represents the most frequently used organizational pattern for information books. In such works, writers describe their subjects by examining what they believe to be the relevant
parts of that whole. The second most common pattern found in informational books is that of time or chronological order. Since these two patterns appear so frequently, they are less likely to be mentioned in reviews. Still, conscientious reviewers such as Roger Sutton, executive editor for The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books, manage to work them in. Notice how he clues his readers into the chronological sequence of Doris Epler's (1992) The Berlin Wall: "Epler's tidy history of the Wall ends with German reunification; it begins with the economic and political disruption of the Weimar Republic that led to Nazism, World War II, and the subsequent determination by the Allies that Germany would never again be a threat. Clearly outlining the postwar tensions which led to the building of the Wall, as well as those exacerbated by the Wall itself, Epler provides a comprehensive context for the Wall's destruction" (Sutton, 1992a, p. 178).

Frequently authors will use several patterns within a book. A chronological narrative describes John Kennedy's early years in Barbara Harrison and Daniel Terris' (1992) biography, A Twilight Struggle: The Life of John Fitzgerald Kennedy. Yet, when they deal with Kennedy's presidency, the authors deftly move from this pattern to expository chapters on topics such as domestic policies, foreign affairs, and the arts. Again, reviewers should notify readers of these shifts. Gail Gibbons (1992), in The Great St. Lawrence Seaway for example, uses both chronological sequence and enumeration, a dual pattern obvious to readers of this review: "Gibbons' account of the Seaway begins in 1535 with the French explorations; she goes on to show the early canals, settlements, and the first lock, built in 1779. The four-panel demonstration of how this lock works is a good introduction to the more intricate (if essentially the same) operations of the system today, shown through the experiences of one large 'laker' as it progresses from the Atlantic, through the fifteen locks of the Seaway, to Gary, Indiana" (Sutton, 1992b, p. 179).

CONCLUSION

With over 5,000 children's and young adult books published every year, librarians, teachers, parents, and booksellers must rely on review journals for opinions about titles, authors, and trends. Since review sources have such an impact on the field, their treatment of both specific titles and books in general influences the reception of those works. The best reviewers don't take these responsibilities lightly; they respect both books and readers. They don't operate from a preset checklist and
tally up an appropriate number of points to determine a book's final rating. Instead, they evaluate each book as a whole, giving it "the respect and treatment—the skill and care—of art" (Meltzer, 1976, p. 19).

REFERENCES


