

A World of Information: Children's Non-Fiction Books in the Digital Age



YUVAL ZOMMER

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Editorial

As a librarian I was constantly meeting people – adult readers and parents who would tell me (often with a hint of superiority) – that they, their partner or their child did not or would not read fiction. It would seem that fiction was something to be despised and had no relation to what has popularly been termed ‘non-fiction’. On the other hand the mere term ‘non-fiction’ has a dismissive and negative air to it; far better to adopt the term ‘information’ perhaps. While I have ideas of my own why this divide takes place, I firmly believe both approaches to reading are valid and should be celebrated, I also think that we should remember that both ‘fact’ (so called) or ‘fiction’ involve the telling of a story. And both should be inspiring, engaging – and imaginative and truthful.

But surely facts are boring – all those dates, numbers, real life. Certainly the way in which factual information is presented can be daunting and uninspiring. How to change this? The recent IBBY UK one-day conference aimed to show how this can happen not just by the writing – though this is crucial – but by the use of illustration to attract attention and bring a subject alive. But what does this involve? Beautiful spreads sweeping across the pages perhaps – but how would they relate to the information the writer is trying to convey? Ana Paula Campos examines the elements that she feels are necessary for illustrations of texts whose purpose is to impart information to young readers. Taking *Lá fora*, published by Planeta Tangerina in Portuguese but available here in translation, she presents – and illustrates – her criteria. This book does not use a novelistic approach; it is very clearly information, but the varied

illustrations allow readers to make connections in different ways.

Yuval Zommer, as an illustrator, picks up this theme; how to engage young readers by innovative and attractive approaches to the information that is on offer. His aim is to get young readers to have a very physical experience – and he does not see this as just the opening of the book – by unfolding pages, following a trail, becoming an active participant to journey underground or travel into space. His work recognises that young people today live in an interactive world and that for information to have an impact it must be relevant to how young people experience life. The cover of this issue demonstrates this – thank you, Yuval Zommer.

How does this translate to the classroom or to family learning? Having a prettily illustrated information text does not guarantee accuracy – even the illustrations might present or cement false assumptions; how to encourage the young to develop a critical approach to material relevant to their subject using both text and illustration to raise questions. Both Karen Bentall and Diletta Donati approach this aspect. Karen Bentall describes a classroom approach in which she took an informational picture book to reach a very diverse class of students. The illustrative aspect allowed her students to relate to the information by making the subject visual and therefore no longer abstract. This bringing-to-life is emphasised by Diletta Donati who examines the way real people – biography – can be presented to young readers. She does not ignore the text but emphasises that readers can meet a subject and feel a real connection and engagement, without lists of dates or tabulations of activities but by the visual creation of aspects that become intangible

and meaningless when pinned down by words.

Using illustration to reach an audience for information is not new. Martin Jenkins, as author of many titles, records his experiences in this field. It is clear that the collaboration with illustrators has been both rewarding and essential – and recognised by innovative publishers, paving the way for the current scene. It is not that accuracy or research should be abandoned – far from it, indeed the challenge is now the explosion of information available at the digital fingertip. Now accuracy must be presented in a way that adds more than the screen experience; both words and pictures must work to reach the reader.

Reaching the reader was certainly the aim of *Girl* magazine as it brought lively characters and retellings of classics through its presentation to a wide audience. Nor did it confine itself to fiction.

Looking to inspire its female readership it used the comic-strip format to provide information on potential careers (today we may wince at what is on offer and to whom) but there was a genuine effort to open doors that might be otherwise closed as Louise Johnson demonstrates in her article on the *Girl* feature ‘I want to be an’.

Great illustrations do not have to be fanciful; they can be grounded in real representation. The work of Beatrix Potter might to some seem whimsical – all those animals wearing clothes, but as the exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum reminded us her work was based on detailed observation and meticulous draughtsmanship – even when she was creating fairyland. We may not be able to visit the museum but we can go back to her books to appreciate this marriage of information and imagination.

Ferelith Hordon

Inventário: Design Influences on Science Picture Books for Children

Ana Paula Campos lives and works in São Paulo, Brazil. She is a graphic designer and since 2015 has run a creative studio with a partner, where they work mostly for projects aimed at children and their carers in the fields of education, literature, culture and science. Before that, she worked as an information designer for the science magazine *Pesquisa Fapesp* from 2011 to 2019. In 2016, she obtained a Master's degree from the University of São Paulo with research about the design of non-fiction picture books for children and young people. Since then, she has been studying, writing and teaching about the relationship between infographics, text, design and illustration in children's non-fiction picture books.

As a graphic designer from São Paulo, Brazil, I did a four-year Master's programme on design and scientific dissemination for children. It was only in the final stages of this process that I came across informational books and found that there were practically no theoretical texts in Portuguese on the subject. I believe that at the time, in late 2014, only me and four or five other people were studying this in Brazil . . . and perhaps the situation is not too different today. There is still much to do and I hope that this article can contribute toward a deeper and wider-reaching understanding of informational picture books, thus I am available to continue the conversation beyond this text.

I keep on with my research independently, and after some years, it has become clear that fiction and non-fiction picture books share expressive verbal-visual language resources, with some specificities in the case of non-fiction. And I believe that these specificities may be better understood with the support of information design theory, which is intrinsically interdisciplinary. And this is why the works of Professor Sue Walker helped me greatly in my Master's studies.

I will present here the categories of analysis that I used to undertake a global reading of informational books with the book *Lá fora: Guia para descobrir a natureza* (*Outside: A Guide to Discovering Nature*), from 2014, from Portuguese publisher Planeta Tangerina, as a case study.



This book was selected because of its characteristic functioning, which responds to questions very typical of our times: it arose out of a process of collaborative and participatory creation and has fundamental playful aspects and arduous information design and visualisation work.

According to Walker, to characterise information books, we may take into account **contextual factors** (the context of the creative process and its influence on design decisions) and **intrinsic factors** (characteristics inherent to the book's content). Let's begin by discussing some of the contextual factors of *Outside*.

What is referred to as **PRODUCTION** are the processes, agents and technology involved in the production of the book. The publisher Planeta Tangerina holds many workshops to maintain contact with children and, in this way, gathers ideas for its projects and promotes the release of its products. In this book, the creators began with children's initial questions in order to ensure that their curiosities would be covered. As a team, their process was considerably participatory, with all providing their opinion during the conception phase.

The team was one made up mainly of image professionals: six designers and illustrators (who in some cases were the authors of some of the texts as well) and a writer. As a design publisher, Planeta Tangerina has the freedom to produce and publish books in accordance with what is most interesting or challenging, always basing itself on themes proposed by internal staff members, who conceptualise the book as a whole.

The category **MEDIUM** refers to the physical characteristics of the material. The book is reminiscent of a natural sciences textbook, an encyclopaedia, or a field notebook containing the annotations of a naturalist. It features a large number of pages (368 all told), a hard cover and woven binding, which makes it easy to open and comfortable to read, but it is slightly heavy for small hands and not very practical if you actually want to take it with you on a nature outing. Apart from this, as we shall see, it has many of the qualities of a quality informational book, as can be attested to by the fact that it has won many awards and been translated into more than seven languages.

The category **USAGE** refers to the needs of the user and the circumstances in which the book is used. *Outside* seems to have been planned with individual reading in mind, given the size of the font in the different levels of hierarchy of the texts, which were probably intended for an audience that already has a certain mastery of reading. Even so, it contains many opportunities for joint reading among adults, young people and children as a result of the

spreads organised in a very diagram-like way, and the support of local and global tools to facilitate the reading process.

An example of this crossover characteristic is the book's paratext. In the presentation text on the back cover, we notice three subtly distinct ways of addressing readers, with different typographical treatments (bold, regular and different-sized letters) and different contents and stances with regards to the reader. The final passage seems to be directed at those who have bothered to read the text through to the end, for it brings more information on the book – possibly for an adult deciding whether or not to purchase it.

On another hand, there are the intrinsic factors that highlight a few important ideas for the understanding of informational books.

In the category of **CONTENT** are the components of the information to be communicated. *Outside* is organised in parts: introduction, scientific contents divided into chapters and additional content (a glossary, an environmental timeline and a list of online sources for new searches).

In this sense, *foci* is an important aspect of conveying information. *Outside* transmits an entertaining and accessible vision of scientists' work through the way the information is transmitted by words and images. This illustration shows the method for the collection and analysis of biological traces, which may be regarded as a 'follow the trail' game.



Illustrating 'Content'

In this illustration, rational thought takes the place of magical thought to explain that it is rather ill-advised to go around kissing

frogs. The image is read first, as a result of an intrinsic characteristic of pictorial language, and because here it is considerably larger than the text, as well as being very attractive and recognisable. Because it is simple, it allows the reader's gaze to flow across to the text, which surprises us with an explanation that refers to the fable in an ironic way:

Does anyone want to kiss a frog to see what happens? It's better not to. A frog will always be a frog, and giving it a kiss could bring you an itch, but never a prince!

This is a counterpoint relationship, in which the image has the function of evoking or persuading, while the text has that of informing. This relationship between opposites – the thinking of fables versus that of science – enriches the informational book's discourse in accommodating different visions of the world, with their discourses in constant construction and confrontation.

Outside's words and images suggest an implicit child reader, represented by the characters of the girl and the boy, shown as autonomous, in a free and active deportment.



Illustrating 'Content'

The illustrator Bernardo Carvalho tells of the role these images perform in the construction of the book's messages:

For me, this is truly very important, trying to get people to think that this book is also about them. . . . Tons of kids have come to me asking: 'that's me, isn't it?'

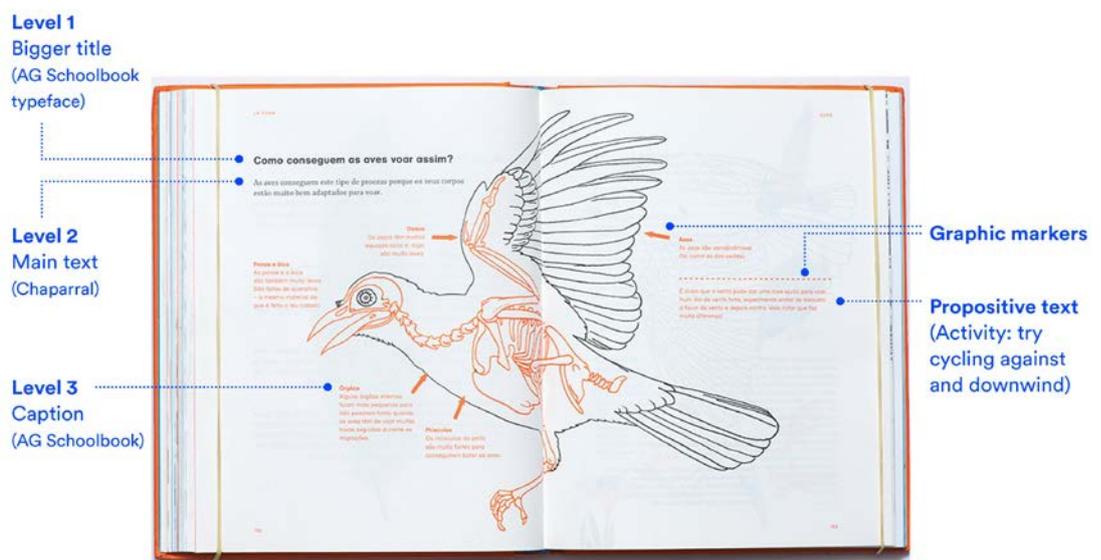
LINGUISTICS refers to the language structures that make up the elements of the layout. The different types of relationship between

texts and images arise as a result of different combinations of the elements that make up the modes of graphic language: **verbal mode** (words and numbers), **pictorial mode** (figurative images) and **schematic mode** (abstract forms). The combinations between the modes and elements of graphic language arise according to 'methods of configuration', which are the forms in which information is organised. As such, these forms may be linear (pure, interrupted or ramified), in list form, in a matrix or non-linear.

The category **RHETORIC** refers to the rhetorical relationships between the elements of the content – words, images and schematic elements – and how they are argued in order to build meanings. In *Outside* there is a prevalence of open texts, with the use of many questions and dialogues with an informational, evocative and propositional function. With regards to the images, we find a predominance of the relationship of redundancy and amplification of the verbal texts: the contents represented in the two modes refer to the same ideas, but communicate different aspects – one may say more than the other without contradicting or repeating it.

NAVIGATION refers to the ways in which the usage planned for the document is conducted. In the words of editor Isabel Minhós Martin:

This is really what reading an album is: reading not just words, but images as well; reading not just pages, but sequences. Reading covers, endsheets, rhythms and changes in rhythm, reading scenes, views, details, different types of representation, constantly making linkages between the elements, taking pleasure in the movement, noise, pauses and silence of the pages.



Illustrating 'Navigation'

We find the use of **local and global tools** cited by Walker as ways of structuring content. In the case of *Outside*, the structuring is well defined on the global level and looser on the local level. The formatting of the spreads is rather varied, seeking a rhythm with few repetitions. On the level of global tools, we have the division by chapters, the consistent use of colour and the different design techniques to demarcate the transition from one type of content to another. Whereas, on the local level, the tools used to assist in the navigation and identification of the different contents are mainly typographic and may also include schematic elements like lines, arrows, asterisks, bullets and frames.

The organisation of the themes presents a high level of coherence in relation to the spreads, which configure thematic units in which the images dialogue with the main text, establishing a relationship of mutual construction of information.

And finally **LAYOUT**, which refers to the nature, appearance and position of the communicational elements on the pages. In the book, the levels of information go side by side with the main text, which brings the elementary information of each chapter. The levels of reading of the verbal and pictorial texts are varied: main text, image legends, activities, proposals for activities, boards for comparing species, descriptive illustrations, infographics, watercolours, chapter openings and monochromatic boards.

Two different types of illustration are present in the book.

Evocative illustrations recall for images without any direct reference in the main verbal text and that may appear with or without a legend. Their primordial function is not to present data or illustrate precise information from the text, but rather to provide breathing pauses while reading.

On the other hand, **informative illustrations** represent the elements touched upon in the verbal texts with simple and 'naturalistic' forms through operations of representation, comparison, visualisation of processes and spatial descriptions. They make it easier to understand and compare ideas, which is a fundamental support in the case of information being introduced to children.

Another aspect is **scale**: how can relationships of size be shown in a way that is not merely factual, such as the use of a ruler? This can be noticed in the many diagrams shown in the book. **Diagrams** are units of verbal-visual information arranged on the spreads in a more complex way than simple texts with isolated illustrations. This complexity depends on the types of relationship between text and image, on how close or far the legends are, on the volume of information and, if the images present the information in a synoptic manner (with only one image), or in a composite made up of

different elements (that explain a phenomenon or process in two or more steps).



Illustrating 'Informative'

In this sense, **infographics** in *Outside* appear in spreads with complex diagrams dedicated to explaining a single theme. The objective of the infographic images is to visually describe and provide additional support to what is said in the text.



Illustrating 'Infographics'

In conclusion, the categories of analysis brought up by my research support a global reading on children's non-fiction books, taking into

consideration the role of design in the conception of these works. In general, it may be noted that the more wide-reaching and initial the presence of design-oriented thought is in the elaboration of the book, the more the final product will be able to benefit in terms of artistic quality and content. The designer is a facilitator between content and the reading public, an intermediary and translator of complex ideas, thus serving the cause of the democratisation of the construction of knowledge and the circulation of information.

Acknowledgements

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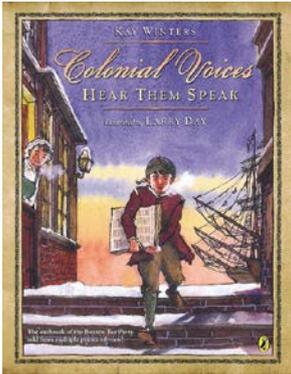
Storytime and Engaged Learning with an Informational Poetry Picture Book

Karen Bentall has worked at state- and independent-school libraries in the UK and the US. Last year, she took study leave from her position as school librarian in the Washington DC area to complete an MPhil in Critical Approaches to Children's Literature at the University of Cambridge, and is the recipient of the Jacqueline Wilson Award for Best Thesis.

Non-fiction picture books are a staple of storytime for me and my 620 students. After the extraordinary stillness when all eyes and ears are on the book, I aim to facilitate inclusive, highly focused and exhilarating discussions as we process new knowledge and insight about the world around us. During my years of practice as a school librarian, I noticed that something powerful happens in the minds and motivations of children when they collectively attend and respond to the reading aloud of non-fiction picture books.

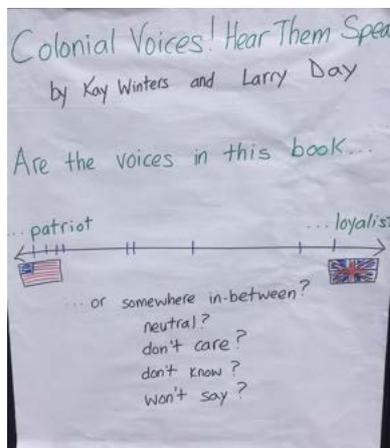
I work at a school where almost 25% of students are economically disadvantaged. More than 30% are learning English as a second language. Yet I sense that they all, regardless of background knowledge or ability, enjoy listening and responding to non-fiction picture books. Scaffolded discussions develop their skills for visual and literacy interpretation, and the type of critical thinking that they will need for their own good and the good of others in a complex, confusing, changing world. But like classroom teachers, I am required to provide evidence of learning. I tried various assessment techniques, but none captured the sense of enchantment and intellectual growth that occurred during storytime discussions. It was palpable and powerful, but I couldn't explain how or why. Because it couldn't be explained, it couldn't be measured. And because it couldn't be measured, it wasn't valued in the data-driven education climate in which I work. In an attempt to understand, I took a year's study leave at the University of Cambridge to pursue an MPhil in Education with a focus on critical approaches to

children's literature. My 20,000-word thesis detailed empirical research with 142 fourth-grade (age 9-10) students who were learning about the complex, confusing and changing world of the period leading up to the American Revolution. (Dare I call it Brexit 1773 style? The people were divided, and tempers were high.) Seven highly qualified and experienced classroom teachers with contextual knowledge about their students observed the storytime lessons. They completed surveys during and after the lessons, which provided the data for my study.



I used an informational picture book of poetry: *Colonial Voices! Hear Them Speak!* by Kay Winters and Larry Day (2008). In free verse, it tells of the outbreak of the revolutionary war from the point of view of 14 colonists. The book communicates to readers on a spectrum of ages and experience. Fluent readers can master unfamiliar phrases and words from the eighteenth century. Novice readers might have a more perceptive eye for pictorial details. It is ideal for a classroom of students of varying backgrounds, reading ability and languages. Every sighted student can glean something from the images alone. Every hearing-student can glean something from the words read aloud by the teacher. The characters' differing perspectives have the potential to foster productive dialogue, which directly correlates with the curriculum standards that require students to describe everyday colonial life and identify the reasons that the colonies went to war with Great Britain. The objective of this storytime was to seamlessly integrate cross-curricular standards in literacy, history and research.

I used an electronic version of the book displayed on a large screen. As students stepped up to the screen to point to the part of the text that supported their reasoning, I could instantly magnify the words allowing the entire class to visually focus on the evidence while listening. To begin, I asked the students to look at the front cover and a poster I had prepared in advance.



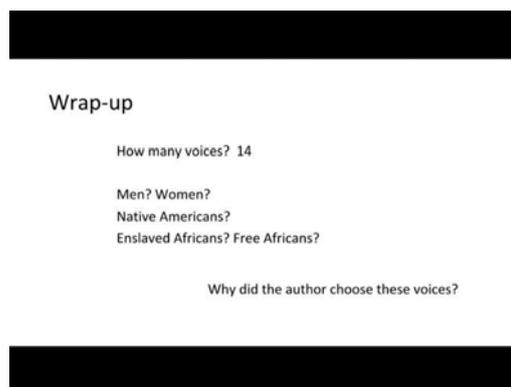
I told students that we would be deciding whether the people in this book were patriots, loyalists or somewhere in-between. After reading each voice I asked the students to respond with a signal. With their hands, they could make a 'P' shape for patriot (i.e. a revolutionary) or an 'L' shape for loyalist (a supporter of King George III and parliament). They could add a slight shake of the hand to indicate somewhere in-between, perhaps because the colonist doesn't know, doesn't care or won't say. Students showed evidence for their opinion on the page on the screen. Other students were invited to add more evidence to support the claim, or to offer conflicting evidence. When we reached consensus, the first student marked the poster, showing on the spectrum the degree to which that colonist is a patriot, loyalist or neither. This pattern of readaloud, response, discussion and agreement was repeated for every colonist. In wrapping up, we discussed the balance of perspectives, and students considered why the author chose those 14 voices and whose were omitted.



One example of encouraging children to think critically is the close examination of two consecutive pages that describe the barber and the blacksmith's slave. The raised eyebrows and chins of the barber and his clients suggest haughtiness as they look down their noses at the patriots' plans. The barber's verse refers to human hair from London as 'the best quality to be had!'. It ends with the barber admiring the judge's new wig and reflecting that '[h]e looks a proper Englishman!'. There is no doubt as to the political persuasion of this colonist. Errand boy Ethan, meanwhile, is staring at the jar of leeches. The bold label 'LEECH' might invoke multiple interpretations from sophisticated readers. Leeches were used by barbers in the hope of curing bruises (peritext). Another meaning of the word 'leech' refers to someone who takes advantage, like a parasite. This meaning resonates as the page is turned to the blacksmith's slave.

The enslaved man is hunched toward the fire and bound by chains. Their postures alone suggest the power dynamic between master and slave. Ethan stands between them, suggesting that there is only

one voice that matters in this room. This image is characteristic of the way that slavery has been taught in the past. It is one-dimensional. It denies the myriad covert and overt ways that enslaved people resisted. *Colonial Voices* tends to deflect, rather than invite, critical engagement here because it gives only one perspective for the enslaved. This ideological stance is especially problematic in Virginia where the legacy of the arrival of the first documented Africans 400 years ago can be seen and felt today. Most notable are the events of Charlottesville in August 2017 where counter-protester Heather Heyer was killed during a white-nationalist rally. Lawrence Sipe, in his book *Storytime: Young Children's Literary Understanding in the Classroom* (2008), asks how children might learn to identify ideologies through literary understanding (p.238), because doing so helps them to think critically about how stereotypical racial, sexual and class attitudes are implicitly inscribed and how they shape social norms today. After leading a discussion about the perspective of each colonist, I asked students to consider these questions:



By guiding the students to interrogate the book as a whole, we discussed the author's intent. Collectively, we concluded that she wanted to teach the multiple perspectives leading up to the Boston Tea Party. We would have to look elsewhere for perspectives of the enslaved, the free Blacks and the Native Americans. A decade after *Colonial Voices*, Kay Winters and Larry Day created *Voices from the Underground Railroad* (2018), which tells the tale of two runaway enslaved siblings in 1861 from various perspectives: the enslaved, their helpers, their hunters, and the enslavers. Close analysis of this book reveals a shift in attitude. Here author Kay Winters invites critical engagement with a truer, more personal stance that reveals her research process.

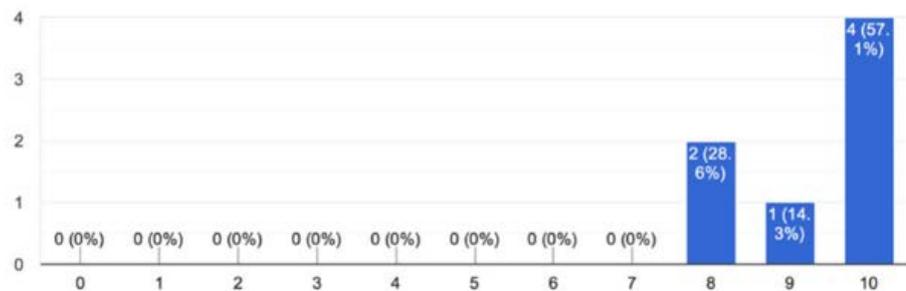
In his book *A Literature of Questions: Nonfiction for the Critical Child* (2018), Joe Sutliff Sanders explores the vulnerability of characters. When non-fiction reveals characters' mistakes and flaws, it encourages rather than negates children's critical thinking. It is evident in the verse that describes the act of throwing the tea

crates off the ships into the harbour: the Boston Tea Party. ‘On British warships docked nearby/ no sailor sounds a warning’ followed by blank space that demands a pause. Were the sailors sleeping? Was no one on the warship on lookout duty? Is this a glimpse of a crack in authority? Was the British navy complacent? Or did the sailors notice the ‘Mohawks’ but refrained from leaping to the defence of the tea company? In addition to the multiple perspectives of the colonists, here readers might consider that not every British subject was a staunch supporter of King George III and parliament.

How effective was this lesson? Were all 142 students critically engaged with the content? Seven teachers with contextual insight and knowledge about their students observed the lessons.

How engaged were the students with this read-aloud?

7 responses



	Number of teacher responses				
	Extremely effectively	Very effectively	Somewhat effectively	Not so effectively	Not at all effectively
Draw conclusions about the text and make inferences using the text as support.	5	2			
Identify cause and effect relationships.	1	6			
Identify main idea.	4	3			
Summarize supporting details.	4	3			
Differentiate between fact and opinion.	1	5	1		
Use vocabulary from content areas.	5	1	1		
Demonstrate comprehension of literary nonfiction.	4	3			
Use context to clarify meaning of unfamiliar words.	4	3			

The extent of the development of historical, critical and literary thinking skills among a diverse group of fourth graders is difficult to assess, but the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ interaction

with this book revealed high levels of engagement, connections of prior learning to new knowledge, and the development of reading skills. They regarded this to be an effective use of a non-fiction text to seamlessly integrate specific literacy, history and research-curriculum standards.



But I wonder about the transferability of this study. Could it be replicated elsewhere? What would happen if I took this same lesson to a different school where I would be stepping into an environment where I was not a trusted colleague and teacher? Part of my action-research this year is to investigate this possibility.

Also, I tried to make this study about the book and not about me, but I found that my performance of the text couldn't be separated and isolated. The orality of the poetry and my use of accents breathed life into the characters. Teachers perceived this to be a factor in sustaining engagement during this hour-long lesson. So perhaps this lesson is not easily replicated by teachers who feel less confident with the performative aspect of storytime. My background in reading aloud stems from my childhood in Wales, where I was steeped in the rich oral tradition of the Welsh language and poetry recitation at Eisteddfods. Teresa Cremin (2009) of the University of Cambridge led one study that revealed the crucial role that teachers' personal passion for poetry plays in the motivation of reluctant readers. If reading poetry aloud – and especially poetry combined with non-fiction – is a proven instructional strategy that motivates and engages every student in the seamless integration of literacy and curricula objectives, then more room should be made for it in the professional development of teachers and librarians.

Since this small study, I have returned to my school with new insight and a renewed conviction about the power of storytime and dialogue, but I'm still searching for more ways to provide evidence of the effect they can have on children's wellbeing and intellectual development. Recent research reveals inequality of access and opportunity to school libraries. There is a stubborn education attainment gap in England and the US that persists despite years of

interventions. Too many children are still being left behind. In a future that seems likely to include increasing inequality, political instability and climate change, children need to develop critical thinking skills and empathetic dispositions to navigate a path for their own good and for the good of others. Non-fiction books, especially those that invite dialogue through a transparent research process, and engage readers with poetic text and captivating illustrations, can be powerful tools to cultivate the promise of every child.

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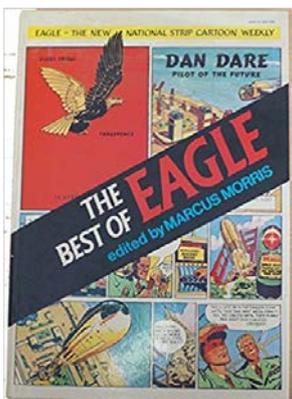
I Want to Be an . . . Air Stewardess: The Careers Comics of *GIRL* (1951-1964)

Louise Johnson is a first year PhD candidate with the Department of Education, University of York. She researches girls in children's literature, with a particular interest in school stories and fictional communities of girlhood. She can be found online at her book blog didyoueverstoptothink.com, and also co-hosting the literary fiction podcast Novel Gazing: <https://bookriot.com/listen/shows/novel-gazing/>.



I was always going to read *GIRL*. Was there ever any other choice for somebody who grew up in the eighties reading the weekly *Twinkle* (1968-1999) and began to collect books in the nineties, driven by the republishing of the Chalet School books by Elinor M. Brent-Dyer? It was a heady period for anybody, let alone one who had an intimate knowledge of their local Waterstones and capable of grimly hoarding their pocket money for weeks on end.

Twinkle and the Chalet School books set me on the way towards *GIRL*, but I needed a compilation of *The Best of EAGLE* - bought by an elder brother and left behind when he moved out - to give me that final push. It was here that I found comics that were unlike anything I'd ever seen before, devoid of that rather rounded sweetness that pervaded every page of *Twinkle*. Instead of having bouncy ponytails of impeccable quality, the characters of *EAGLE* went to Mars. The difference was remarkable. These were comics that spoke to me. They offered a mode of storytelling that the eighties and nineties - for all their strange brilliance - simply could not offer.



And so I found my way towards *GIRL*, a weekly comic published between 1951 to 1964 by Hulton Press. Hulton Press was the home of *EAGLE*, an established title on the shelves at that point, and *GIRL* came from the same creative team. The editor of *EAGLE*, Marcus Morris, had sought to create a periodical that was especially for girls and went so far as to directly ask readers for help in 'getting to know for certain what sort of things you like'. At first, the circulation was poor and Morris decided that this was due to the 'mistake of not taking sufficiently into account the difference between the masculine and the feminine psychological make-up. The difference is a very real one' (Morris and Hallwood, 1998: 164). Things had to

change: more girls were reading *EAGLE* than *GIRL* and so Morris adopted a new editorial stance:

[W]e had made *Girl* too masculine. We therefore made it more romantic in its approach, more feminine. I worked on the theory that you should be a good deal more personal in your motivation in a girls' paper. (p.164)

A rebranding occurred and alongside the introduction of iconic – and suitably ‘feminine’! – strips such as *Belle of the Ballet* by George Beardmore and John Worsley and the redesign of the logo, *GIRL* saw its circulation figures increase from 500,000 (p.163) to a steady 650,000 (p.164). It was well on its way to becoming a ‘watershed’ publication within British comics, not just for its quality of storytelling but also for the rich production values (Gibson, 2015: 43).

What Children Think of Their Comics (Pumphrey, 1964) provides an interesting reading of this new periodical on the block. The author, George Pumphrey, carried out a small-scale quantitative survey of children and their reading habits in the 1950s and published both his findings from this survey and his thoughts on British comics in general. He writes with a certain acerbic appeal that a particular issue of *GIRL* has

‘2 quite good’ written stories alongside some useful occupations: ‘Patterns. Quiz’, several special features: ‘Film – Tommy Steele. Pop music material. Pin-up of Joe Brown. Good Discussion’

before giving it the overall rating of C+ (pp.38–39). It may seem a somewhat hard rating, but only three comics in his wide-ranging survey receive an A:

***Animals* possesses ‘excellent pictures and features on animals’ (pp.40–41), *Knowledge* has ‘material of great educational interest’, and *Understanding Science* has ‘great deal of interesting authentic information’ (pp.44–45).**

In direct contrast to this, *Elvis Monthly* and *Billy Fury Monthly* receive a D, alongside *Superman* and *Superboy*, which both suggest ‘success through magical powers and physical strength’ (pp.43–45). Even from this brief reading, it’s clear to see that, for Pumphrey, comics must be educational, preferably non-fiction and scientifically orientated – and the fewer photographs of teen pop idols, the better. Elsewhere he devotes time towards examining the ‘What’s Your Worry’ letter column in *GIRL* and in commenting favourably on how it seeks to support readers through complex personal problems – yet the C+ rating remains. It’s perhaps redundant here to wonder if a teenage girl’s opinion would have differed from that of an adult man . . .

GIRL was more than what many people made of it. It did not shy away from the real world, and concerned itself with exploring both the fictional and non-fictional experiences of girlhood and the transition into young womanhood. It is in this latter space that we find the ‘I want to Be’ strips, a repeating series of comics that explored the careers available to a young woman and how to achieve them.



Notably, gathered and sold in a standalone volume, *I Want to Be . . . A Girl Book of Careers* (1957), due to their fierce popularity, were republished nearly 50 years later in *Charm School: Advice for the Thoroughly Modern Girl* (2006). They are fascinating and somewhat compulsive reading, indicative not only of an early form of careers education but also of societal views about the figure of the girl herself. Each comic is introduced with a brief precis of the girl and her skill. Ruby ‘likes working with her hands’ and wants to be a plastics designer (p.75); Linda is ‘very observant’ with ‘a good memory’ and wishes to be a continuity girl (p.51). Alice is a ‘modern young woman’ and yearns to be a ‘steno-typist’ (p.63). For a modern reader, it’s easy to find humour here. Jane, who wishes to be a chiropodist does not directly touch a foot (p.69); Felicity, a personnel officer, spends more time playing table tennis and having lunch than she does doing paperwork (p.37), and Jill, a policewoman, receives a uniform that is made to her own measurements and ends her panel dancing in the arms of a fellow officer (p.47).

Yet, placing amusement aside, these are clearly comics of ‘ambition and achievement’ intended to ‘introduce girls to the new possibilities that the post-war reconstruction offered women’ (Philips, 2000: 78). The careers presented are diverse, albeit a diversity that locates itself squarely within the remit of careers available to middle-class girls of a predominantly white and European background, and embrace some unusual and creative options. Lois wants to demonstrate domestic appliances (Russell, *Charm School*, 2006: 71), Anita wants to be a radio technician (p.74), and Peggy wishes to be an architect – having been inspired by designing her own dolls’ house as a child (p.53). However it’s noticeable that though all careers are available, some are – to paraphrase Orwell – more available than others. The *I Want to Be . . .* offers long-form descriptions of careers such as teaching (p.16), librarianship (p.12) and midwifery (p.24) but stays away from elaborating further on how to enter architecture, become a radio technician or how to demonstrate domestic appliances. It’s perhaps of interest at this point to mention that the most dominant adverts in the *I Want to Be . . .* come from established high-street financial institutions including: Barclays Bank: ‘agreeable work in congenial

company, with a good salary and excellent prospects of promotion' (p.61); Lloyds Bank: 'Marriage need not interrupt a successful career' (p.5); and Midland Bank: 'You really feel you're someone when you join the staff of the Midland Bank' (p.55). The presence of these reinforces the inevitability that a vast amount of *GIRL*'s readership would work for one of these – or a similar – institution.

The reader of the *I Want to Be . . .* strips is asked to inhabit a strange position. She is to be both a contradiction and an expectation (Philips, 2000: 77), to know her place in the world and yet exert considerable effort to exceed and improve upon it. The 'brilliant' Sylvia must spend ten years training, alongside an initial expenditure of £200 – the equivalent of £4,700+ today, to qualify as a barrister and earn 'about a thousand pounds a year' (Russell, *Charm School*, 2006: 59). The emphasis on this initial payment of £200 is marked: 'this is a commitment for people with only the financial ability to do so'. Jane, a chiropodist, needs financial support from her father to set up her private practice and 'hopes to increase her clientele in time, so that she can earn her living by her own efforts' (p.69). She's clearly not earning enough to support herself at this point. Sue, a kennel-maid, also requires paternal assistance and ends up owning a small kennels in Sussex with her father where they breed and show cocker spaniels (p.25). A girl requires financial support, parental permission and a certain amount of privilege in order to have a career, it seems.

The artwork of the *I Want to Be . . .* strips is also revealing at this juncture; this is no space for the vibrant panelling of *Dan Dare* which stretch to fully express the magnitude of alien landscapes (Morris, 1977: 32) or to fall away entirely (pp.28, 29, 31), nor the dynamic speech of 'Storm Nelson – Sea Adventurer' which breaks panel boundaries with exuberant freedom (pp.113,119, 120). This is a comic that thrives on regularity, precision and fixed, impenetrable frames. Each comic is of a standard six panels – only on rare occasions does this extend to a full-page strip – and speech remains located within a specific panel. The white space between remains inviolate, whilst the first panel itself sees a headshot of the girl herself. Normally looking out from the page and smiling at the reader, she is accompanied by a brief introduction to her and her skills. The overall effect is peculiarly reminiscent of the 'Girls In Pearls' pages from *Country Life* – these are girls to be seen and viewed, rather than girls in possession of anything approaching personal and independent agency.

What then to make of these comics which promise liberation on one hand but assert subtle layers of control and expectation throughout? I'm conscious that I've provided only a brief

introduction to them here, and an even briefer contradiction to their complexities, and that I've done this with the liberation of a contemporary perspective. Yet despite those caveats, I hope this shows a vital point of the discourse of 'being a girl' in the 1950s. Stephanie Spencer recognises that comics such as *GIRL* provided an introduction into that community of girlhood whilst simultaneously shaping the nature of what that community might be (2005), and, indeed, that despite the onset of 'full employment', the option of young women remained somewhat limited. My own family supports this reading; my mother remembers being furious at the likelihood of earning less than her male counterparts and deliberately chose to enter a career with some parity. The movement towards equal pay - as most recently demonstrated in a series of high-scale pay review cases at the BBC - is still yet to be resolved. Perhaps it's in this nexus that my reading of *I Want to Be . . .* can find most critical purchase: this is a comic that showed young female readers the potential of what was open to them. It also showed them what stood in the way.

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Non-Fiction: Its Relevance, Popularity and Creativity!

Yuval Zommer graduated from the Royal College of Art with an MA in Illustration. He worked for many years as a creative director at leading advertising agencies before becoming the author and illustrator of highly acclaimed non-fiction. His stunning *Big Book Of . . .* series (Thames & Hudson) has been published in 25 territories, and has won and been shortlisted for numerous awards including the UKLA Book Awards, The English Association's Non-fiction Award, and the Made For Mums Award. The latest title *The Big Book of Blooms* publishes in May 2020.

We are in the midst of a golden age for non-fiction as more titles than ever before are being published, with higher production values and covering a wider, more diverse range of subjects. According to figures collected annually by the Booksellers Association, non-fiction is now the fastest growing sector in publishing. But can non-fiction's current popularity be down to simply more resources being allocated by publishers to the genre? The books being more attractively packaged? The contents being more reader friendly? Or is there more to it?

Personally, I believe books exist only when they are needed and relevant, and in this fast-changing world non-fiction books are more relevant and needed than ever before.

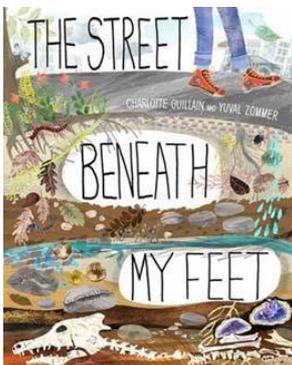


Looking back at my own childhood, which I guess similarly to many of you reading this article predated the internet, smartphones and social media, the world seemed to be a more moderate place, revolving at a slower pace. In contrast today's world seems to have entered a fast-forward mode on all fronts: our weather becoming more extreme, our politics becoming more extreme and, indeed, our technology becoming more extreme. New words and terminology (e.g. climate change, Brexit, recycling, biodiversity, gender politics, coding, sustainability and inclusivity to name but a few) have all entered everyday vocabulary. Yet these are not words that are confined to outside the school walls, our new more complex world inevitably also includes our classrooms. For example, on a recent author visit to a state primary school, whilst queuing for a school dinner with the book-loving teacher and her first-stage-of-reading class, I noticed the children had to read and choose between a

range of menu options including 'vegan' and 'gluten free'. These and many other words were not part of my childhood's everyday language, yet are mandatory for today's children.

Children, as we know, crave knowledge in order to make sense of their world, so the more challenging the world becomes the more parents, teachers and librarians turn to and rely on quality non-fiction to explain, inform and answer some of today's issues. Indeed, not only is the world changing, sometimes it is even the children who actually lead the way and make the change! Schoolgirls such as Malala and Greta are inspirational role models for all ages, their achievements celebrated in non-fiction globally. Nowadays the awareness of climate change and the ripple effect of Friday climate demonstrations cut right through any language and political barriers.

My own Big Book series about the natural world has already been translated into 25 languages. Its appeal is universal and it has been pleasantly reassuring for me to know that young readers, whether they are in China, Russia or the USA, all care about the environment and want to help and protect our planet. My publishers tell me that parents from all geopolitical demographics are now actively asking for planet-friendly content for their children's books. I believe these books build bridges and travel across borders as they help us understand our world and offer hope.



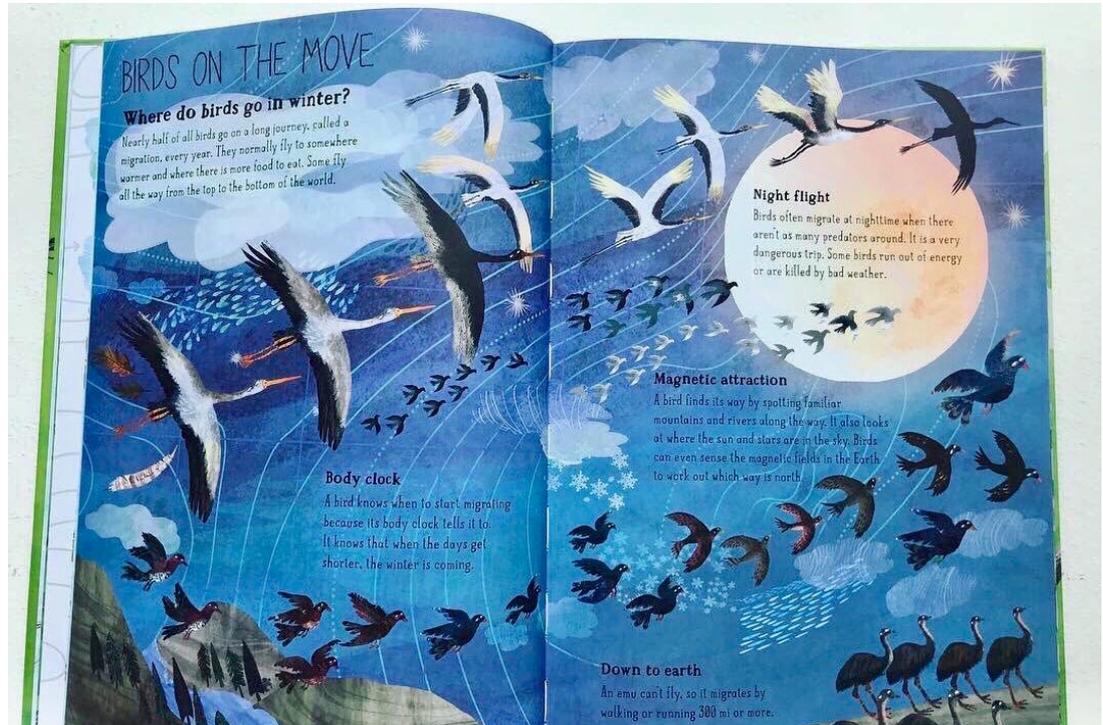
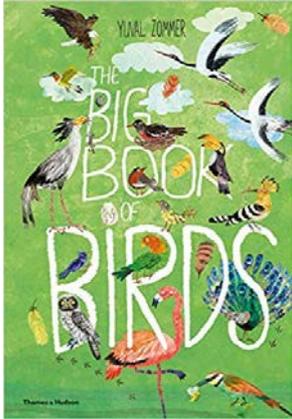
Creatively, working on non-fiction titles is for me pure joy as the large format (I like big books and I cannot lie!) allows me the luxury to use the pages differently and thereby explore the reading experience. I find there are less restrictions about how a book should be read and I can use the pages also vertically or even as a 2.5m long continuous journey through the book (*The Street beneath my Feet* and *The Skies above my Eyes*)!



From *The Street beneath my Feet*. Copyright © 2019 Yuval Zommer.

My pet hate is the old-school type information book and the coffee table book where the text is a long chunk of a paragraph on one page and the illustration is on the other page. I believe words and images should flow together and if you are familiar with my books you'd have noticed that my text is incorporated through the illustrations so the reading experience is enhanced as your eyes

travel across the pages. I find the large format is also ideal for a shared reading experience, whether it's a parent and child's bedtime read or class mates together sharing, exploring and discovering through reading from the same book. I myself have also learnt so much through creating non-fiction as doing the research has meant having access to some amazing experts and places.



From *The Big Book of Birds*. Copyright © 2019 Yuval Zommer.



For my latest upcoming title *The Big Book of Blooms*, which is published in association with Kew Royal Botanical Gardens, I have been privileged to meet with the head gardeners at Kew, learn about rewilding, find out about the world's rarest plants, explore their nurseries and see for myself the conservation work done behind the scenes.

Finally I would like to remind you that it is only us adults who categorise books as fiction or non-fiction, children do not use these terms they will simply read any book they can engage with. There are no 'reluctant' readers in my view, only kids who have not had the right book placed in their hands. This IS a golden age for non-fiction and there are some amazing titles available.

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Getting Us Engaged! The Power of Biographical Picture Books

Diletta Donato is a passionate collector, writer and illustrator of picture books. She is currently doing an MA in Children's Literature at Roehampton University, London. She taught English as a Foreign Language for 17 years in Italy and ran courses aimed at developing children's learning skills through reading projects, acting and drawing. Alongside her teaching work, she has dedicated herself extensively to music and art, performing and recording on international concert tours with Vinicio Capossela and ensembles such as the Cambridge University choirs of Fitzwilliam College and Wolfson College. She is currently researching biographical picture books, and has recently given a talk on the topic at the 2019 IBBY UK conference in London.

Biographical picture books weave their magic in so many different ways. They may sweep us up in the excitement of new research, evoke the past through the power of poetry, or even captivate us with obscure lists of naval equipment, maps and faded photos.

The two biographies I should like to share with you here are *When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson* (2002) by Pam Muñoz Ryan and Brian Selznick, and *The Noisy Paint Box: The Colours and Sounds of Kandinsky's Abstract Art* (2014) by Barb Rosenstock and Mary Grandpré. These biographies are breathing, talking, living dramatisations of Kandinsky's and Anderson's lives. So although they depict historical events, they read very much like fictional picture books with beautifully rendered illustrations and scenes brimming with dialogue and action. Their other peculiarity is the paratextual sections at the end, which substantiate, complement and may even alter our reading of the texts.



When Marian Sang opens with two sumptuously illustrated spreads that transport us back to the turn of the century and the glittering Old Met in New York City. The curtain rises on a girl singing at a brightly lit window. We turn to the title page and, from the verso, we catch her glorious alto tones:

With one breath she sounded like rain, sprinkling high notes in the morning sun. And with the next she was thunder, resounding deep in a dark sky.

Then on the recto we read: *When Marian Sang: The True Recital of Marian Anderson*, libretto by Pam Muñoz Ryan and staging by Brian Selznick. In other words, through illustration, figurative language and the playful allusion to concert programme discourse, the paratext is framing this biography as an opera. This presentation of Anderson's life as a stage performance is not just a wonderfully musical introduction to the text, it is also, and most interestingly, a clue to a practice that is displayed throughout the book, which is to call attention to the subjective, creative nature of writing and illustrating, even when these skills are devoted to producing works of non-fiction.

The sleek, hieratic elegance of Selznick's figures harks back to the Art Deco style of the early part of the twentieth century, and the rich shades of sepia mimic the way photographs were printed at the time. So rather than claiming to provide a direct and objective view of how people and places looked, his illustrations remind us that an illustrator's vision of the past is necessarily filtered through the photography and art of the period. This offers the reader/viewer a perspective that feels a few degrees removed from the historical events, and foregrounds Selznick's mediating role in selecting, presenting and often re-imagining those events. We can observe a similar process in Ryan's text. For example,

In order to address the era in which this story took place, [the author] has, with the greatest respect, stayed true to the references to African Americans as coloured or Negro. (p.40)

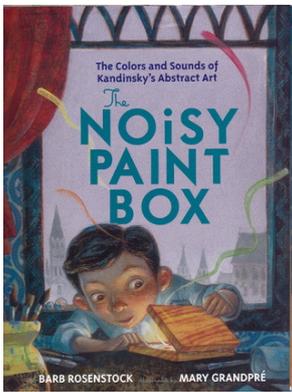
This, as she explains in her notes, is based on the singer's autobiography *My Lord, What a Morning* (2002) in which 'Marian Anderson referred to herself and others of her race in this manner' (p.40). Rather than being disrespectful, this potentially controversial approach is aimed at constructing a narrative that is authentic to the Segregation Era, but, most importantly, by clarifying her reasons, Ryan is making herself visible as an author. As Joe Sutliff Sanders puts it in *A Literature of Questions. Nonfiction for the Critical Child* (2018):

Visible authors make explicit the fact that their ideas come from human sources, which, in keeping with the author's intentions or not, makes stronger the possibility of engaging with a book critically. (p.59)

In this spirit the author's and illustrator's notes go on to explain the extensive research and the personal journeys undertaken in creating this book: the archives, trips and, most movingly, the encounters with people who knew Marian Anderson personally. This has the seemingly contradictory effect of both validating the historicity of their narrative, but also of presenting it as their own version of the

facts. An important distinction thus emerges between two of the fundamental meanings of *history*: the facts that took place in the past and the telling of those facts. Therefore, by encouraging the reader to pick up on Ryan's and Selznick's creative and historiographical choices, these notes create a space where the reader can question the information provided and 'become part of the process of intellectual inquiry rather than its passive beneficiary' (Sanders, 2018: 12).

Further support in this sense is provided through a number of suggestions for museums to visit, books to read and recordings to listen to, thus opening the inquiry well beyond the confines of the book cover. In this way the interplay between text, paratext and peritext in *When Marian Sang* becomes a call to readers to undertake their own personal voyage into the life of Marian Anderson, and take on a co-creative role that will enrich and personalise the book with each re-reading.



The Noisy Paint Box is an exuberant celebration of art and creative freedom, and an inspiring example of the ability of the picture book to bring the past to life.

The first four pages swiftly sum up Vasya Kandinsky's early childhood: he dutifully studies subjects he dislikes, plays the piano with the precision and exuberance of a ticking metronome, and relishes his parents' dinner parties as much as the poorly cooked fish. No singular events, no memorable dates, no changes in season punctuate this iteration of propriety and gloom . . . until the day Vasya's aunt gives him a small, wooden paint box.

Here the iterative time of Kandinsky's ennui slows down to an almost real-time narration so that we feel like Kandinsky's first encounter with painting is happening before our very eyes. Images zoom in on his wonderment, allowing us to peer into his paintbox, while variations in layout and font give voice to a polyphony of characters, colours and musical brushstrokes. As Kandinsky mixes the paints, we hear a whisper, then a hiss.

The swirling colours trilled like an orchestra tuning up for a magical symphony. (p.11)

Streaks of colour escape his paint box, roar across the gutter, and explode like fireworks across Grandpré's double-page spreads; while Rosenstock's text crackles with onomatopoeia, alliteration and similes, producing a kaleidoscopic eruption of colour, sound and motion. In this synchronic rendition of a few gleeful hours, Rosenstock and Grandpré harness Kandinsky's synaesthesia (a neuropsychological trait in which the stimulation of one sense causes the automatic activation of another sense) so that we are

not merely informed that he experienced colours as sounds, but WE do so as well.

Then the narrative speeds ahead: Kandinsky is now a young man studying law in Moscow. Years go by in one page, a decade in one page turn. We hurtle down the diachronic timeline of Kandinsky's life eager to find out how he will ever put aside societal conventions and trust his artistic vision. A quote by the painter himself is printed on the copyright page and sums it up best:

I let myself go. I had little thought for houses and trees, drawing coloured lines and blobs on the canvas with my palette knife, making them sing just as powerfully as I knew how.

By the end of the book do we know more about Kandinsky and abstract art? Yes and no. We don't know many dates, no titles of manifestos, or critics' reviews of the period. However, we are alight with curiosity and open to abstract art like we have possibly never been before.

So we might even find ourselves humming spirituals, looking into modern-art galleries or noticing choices of discourse as we peruse the newspaper, for the magic of these biographies is in the engagement they inspire.

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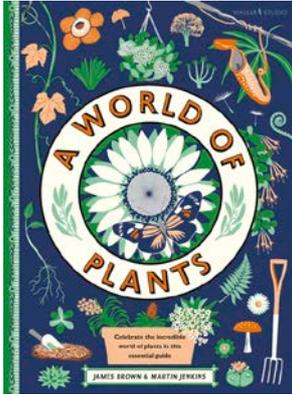
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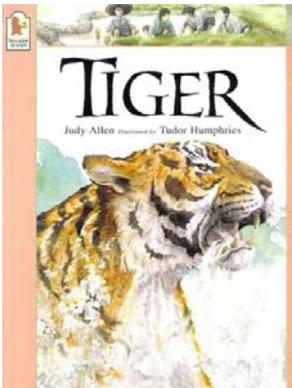
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Prima Le Parole

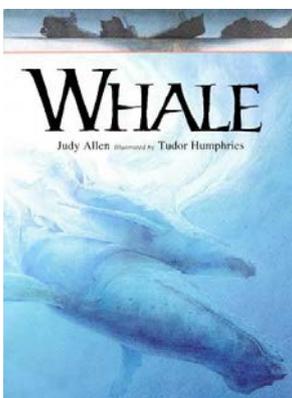
Martin Jenkins originally studied zoology. Between 1980 and 1990 he worked for the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) as a conservation biologist. Since then he has been a freelance consultant, specialising in biodiversity and wildlife trade. He has also written numerous books for children, almost all published by Walker Books. His most recent publication, with James Brown, is *A World of Plants* (2019). He lives in Cambridge and London.



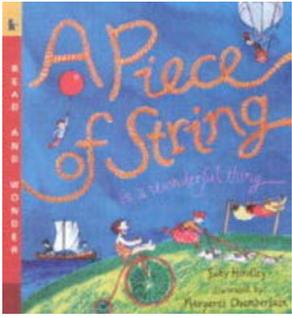
I have been writing non-fiction (information, fact-based, call them what you will) books aimed at children, natural history mainly, for nearly 30 years now. I have had a fair few published and usually several on the go at any one time. In that sense I do have some experience in the business. And yet when asked for a piece on the changes that I had seen in recent years, my immediate response was ‘why me?’ ‘what do I know?’. To some extent that is still the case – I generally go on doing pretty much what I have always done – but on reflection I realised I had surely picked up something along the way and that some of that might be of passing interest. We’re always told it’s best to write about what you’re familiar with. And so here it is: a brief history of my experiences in the world of book making.



It all really happened by accident: I hadn’t particularly thought of becoming a writer, although I’d already produced a couple of books in my other life as a conservation biologist. I had just gone freelance – a relatively unusual (non-)career choice in those days and through a curious set of circumstances found myself advising Walker Books on a series of illustrated animal conservation-themed books they were producing. The pay wasn’t huge (it rarely is) but it was otherwise remarkably good fun. We would meet periodically for a mildly boozy lunch (free wine! those really were the days) and I would be quizzed about drafts and layouts. I’m still a bit hazy about what impact I actually had.



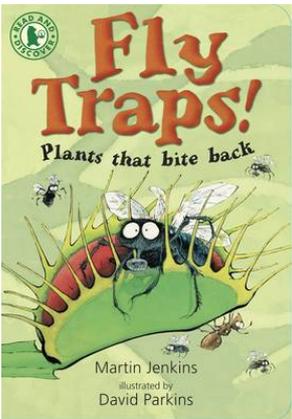
Judy – the writer – was scrupulously accurate and thorough in her research, which meant I rarely had to change a thing. Tudor, the artist, would respond to my comments: ‘isn’t that tiger a bit stretched in the middle?’, or ‘I don’t think a humpback whale can really twist its spine that way – it makes it look like the world’s biggest catfish’ with a spot of good-natured bluster, disappear back to his studio, and still never changed a thing. The elongated tiger and the twisty-spined whale are out there to this day. Somewhere too there’s a splendid picture of a herd of elephants crowded around an African waterhole, one of which has six legs (I got a lot of flak for that) (somewhere quite else, there’s also a gorilla with six fingers clutching a banana, but that’s another story).



I was then asked if I could help out occasionally on a new series of books that Walker was working on. These came under the general rubric of narrative non-fiction and were, I think, remarkably innovative for the time. They were short illustrated books (always original artwork, never photos) that combined a strong narrative with two distinct strands of text: one containing the main storyline and the second – hand lettered in those days – with subsidiary information distributed through the book, intended to open out and enrich the whole reading experience. They were called Read and Wonder and their aim wasn't just to introduce a new approach to non-fiction to young readers but also to push at the boundaries of the subject matter.



Walker was a young, thriving company that prided itself on its experimental approach to book making and was always prepared to try new approaches. So, while the main topic was natural history, there were also books on walls, rivers and pieces of string; there was even a Wheeling and Whirling-around book. Whatever their content there was a belief that the text, design and illustrations should be of the highest possible quality, so that they received the same care and attention as the picture books that were the cornerstone of the company's reputation.

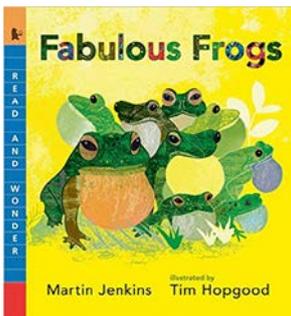


After a period of fact checking on eels and giant octopuses, I was asked by my editor if I'd ever thought of having a go at writing a children's book. I confessed I hadn't really but, spurred on, went off and did some thinking. A few months later I came up with a draft of what was to become my first children's book – on carnivorous plants. It had the makings of a book, but one potentially fatal flaw – something my eagle-eyed editor spotted straight away. She was encouraged enough to give me an actual advance and send me off to revise the thing. I rewrote it, got a contract and, after a hiatus or two, the book (*Flytraps! Plants that Bite Back*) finally appeared in 1996.

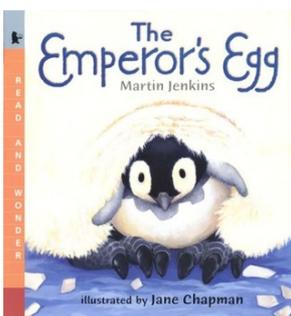
Encouraged by the success of the Read and Wonder series and other ventures, in the mid-1990s Walker took the bold step of establishing what turned out to be a relatively short-lived dedicated non-fiction department. I was involved from the start. This is where I really began to learn about producing non-fiction. My first commission was on invertebrates. I remember blithely drafting a page on dragonflies and faxing it off (very high tech in 1995) only to receive 24 hours later a six page fax in return carefully taking apart every single paragraph I'd written. I remember going into something of a decline, deciding it was all a horrible mistake and that my future as an author was likely to be drawing rapidly to a close. Twenty-four hours and a good night's sleep later, even worse I realised that

pretty much everything my editor had written was bang too right, so I took a deep breath and rewrote the thing, much better this time.

And out of that came what is probably the main lesson I've learnt in all these years: to produce decent books of pretty much any ilk, and especially those aimed at young people, you really really need a good editor. Of course it's a tricky business. Writers are a famously tricky bunch, but someone needs to tell them when they're going wrong. Good editors are like your mother – they're supposed to be irritating, but they should also have your best interests at heart. And perhaps nowhere more so than when facts are at stake. To do their job well they need to be a little bit obsessive, nerdy even, about getting things right and be prepared to prod away at their authors until they too are sure they've got it right. Time and again my editor has said 'I still don't quite get this', pointing at some paragraph I've struggled over for days. And time and again I've stifled my irritation and realised I've been trying to do something like make fractional reserve banking comprehensible for ten-year-olds, and that if my (probably) Oxbridge-educated editor doesn't quite get it then it's not very likely that the ten-year-olds will.



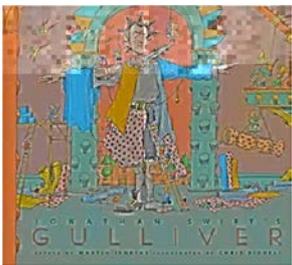
All that was over 20 years ago. The much imitated Read and Wonder books, now known as Nature Storybooks are still going strong, with many of the titles still in print. I've been responsible for a few of these myself, as well as a string of books on all sorts of topics, mostly biological, but also on vampires (fun), time (knotty) and money (really hard, especially the bit about fractional reserve banking), as well as a couple of adaptations of classic novels (*Gulliver's Travels* (2004) and *Don Quixote* (2009), of which I'm particularly proud).



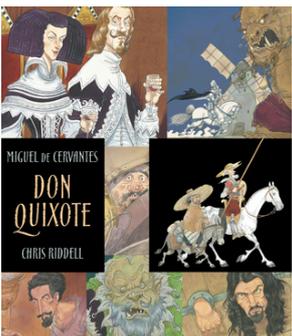
What have I learnt? That it would be pretty hard to earn a decent living doing this full time for one. Few of the books I have written with the exception of *The Emperor's Egg* (1999), about penguins, could be counted as bestsellers. Even so, it can be pretty dispiriting what a low profile the books we produce often have. It's not a sector of the book market, I think, that has traditionally been taken very seriously in this country. This is sad. Anyone who works around children, particularly younger children, knows that they are like sponges, with an insatiable appetite for information and an enviable ability to absorb reams of the stuff. It seems to me we have some kind of responsibility to nurture and feed that appetite if we possibly can. Of course there are attempts to address this: the tireless efforts of the School Library Association's Information book awards and the Royal Society's Young People's book prizes, both spring to mind, but the publicity and attention they garner are as

nothing compared to their generally fictional equivalents such as the Carnegie and the Kate Greenaway.

Luckily things tend to work rather better abroad, particularly in the United States, but also increasingly in Asia. In the US much more attention is focused on the non-fiction market with a far stronger reviewing tradition and a plethora of relevant honours (honors) and awards, even if these rarely have any actual prizes associated with them (though I have built up quite a nice collection of tie pins over the years). I haven't done the actual sums recently but there's little doubt that the bulk of my earnings from royalties come from overseas publications or foreign rights. Nevertheless, without having maintained a parallel life as a conservation biologist, I think I would have had quite a glum time of it.

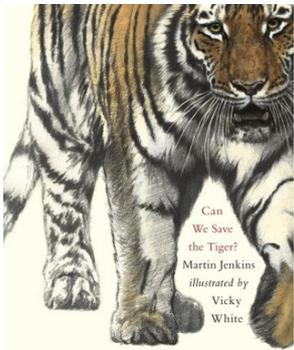


There are signs that this is changing. The past few years have seen a real upsurge in non-fiction publishing in the UK aimed at young readers, much of it with some kind of environmental bent. Indeed just as I was finishing this, a little late as usual, an article appeared in *The Guardian* by Patrick Barkham ('Tears at Bedtime: Are Children's Books Causing Climate Anxiety?') (2020), drawing attention to the recent boom in environmental publishing aimed at children, much of it apparently inspired by Greta Thunberg and citing data from Nielsen Book Research to the effect that publications and sales of new children's books about wildlife and the climate crisis have more than doubled over the past year. Many of these books are beautifully produced – design is something that has moved on a lot in the past 20 years. Often though, they strike me as having one besetting problem, and that is in the quality of the writing. Time and again I've opened beautiful-looking books to find myself wading through leaden paragraphs of half-dead prose, as often as not bearing the imprint of some specialist in the field who has clearly done their best but has little idea of how to structure something in a lively and engaging way or how to pitch it at younger non-technical readers. Of course this is something we can all be guilty of (I've done it myself many times) and one must be careful not to rush to judgement, but there's little doubt it's a real issue in non-fiction generally and not just in that aimed at children.



In fairness I think we can overestimate the sensitivity of young readers to the quality of the prose they encounter (there's quite a successful series of books on wizards that are a good testament to that). But in the final event the words are all we have. And of course they matter – hugely. We do readers (and what else is it ultimately that they're reading?) a huge disservice if we neglect them. Surely we have some sort of responsibility to do the best we can by them, even at the expense of endless rewrites and the not-so-occasional

sense-of-humour failure (that fractional reserve banking again). The other point that Barkham raised in his article is trickier to answer. For years I wrestled with just this. When asked why I hadn't written anything that dealt with the other half of my professional life, I always explained that I didn't want to burden young people with problems over which they had no control or make them feel guilty for a state of affairs they had played no part in creating. Or perhaps I was just thinking up excuses. When I was finally persuaded into writing, I strove to produce something that presented the issues as clearly as possible without simultaneously offering a counsel of despair. The resulting book (*Can We Save the Tiger?* (2010)), beautifully illustrated by Vicky White, bought golden opinions of all sorts of people (though still didn't become a bestseller) and can serve, I like to think, as an example of what can be done.



All that was nearly ten years ago. I'm less sanguine now than I was then. The world has moved on and, I think most people would agree, not in a good way. It's hard for any remotely savvy young person to remain unaware that something is up. The inescapable truth is that us oldies have royally messed things up and if anyone is going to put it right it's their generation. Frankly I don't envy them the task. Everything is a lot more complicated now. Anyone trying to make sense of anything has to negotiate a minefield of facts, half-facts and outright lies; they need all the help they can get. Which all means that we have more responsibility now than ever to go on being as honest as we can and putting as much care into making books as we can.

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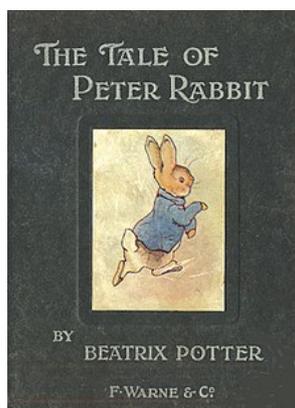
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Exhibition Review

Beatrix Potter's Fairyland

Victoria & Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL.
Monday, 18 November 2019 – Sunday 15 November 2020. Open 10.00 – 17.45. Leighton
Corridor Room 102. Admission free.

[Under restrictions since the outbreak of the coronavirus the museum closed on
18 March 2020 until further notice. Whether this exhibition will open after restrictions
are lifted is unknown.]



Tucked away upstairs in the Victoria & Albert Museum's Leighton Corridor, this well-mounted exhibition, that offers much to delight and surprise, concentrates on those aspects of the creative work of Beatrix Potter (1866–1943) that are rarely seen. Peter Rabbit is, of course, her most famous creation but perhaps less well-known are her visual interpretations of well-known fairy tales, her creation of new ones and how she was inspired by nature and the work of other illustrators.

As an introduction, the V&A's notes tell us how when Beatrix Potter recalled her favourite places, 'she seamlessly merged memory and imagination'. Of an old Scottish holiday haunt Potter remarked that although the elfin castle was no longer hidden in the shadows of Craig Donald Wood she preferred to remember it when 'the great harvest moon rose over the hills' while the fairies danced on the grass. Tree sprites and fairy circuses as well as nature itself, from hedgehogs to fungi, existed in her fairyland world, and in her journal that she began writing when she was 15, she remembered 'half believing and playing with fairies as a child', while the fairy tales of the German brothers Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859) Grimm fired her imagination.

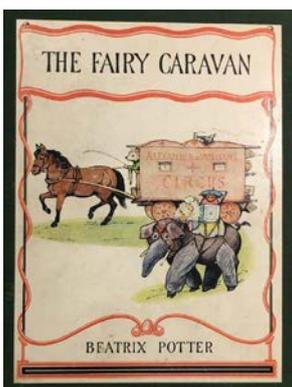
A great English fairy tale, though not written for children, is *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1600) by dramatist William Shakespeare (1564–1616). Inspired by the lyricism of his words Potter took the line 'the cowslips tall her pensioners be' (1868: 215) and, rather than creating a Cicely Mary Barker-like flower fairies illustration, here displayed is an exquisite study in watercolour and pencil on card of cowslips and bluebells (c. 1880s), the cowslips representing the fairy queen Titania's courtiers.

But Potter found inspiration mostly in European fairy stories. For *Little Briar Rose* (*Dornröschen*), from Grimm's *Children's and Household Tales* (1823), she used sepia wash, pen and ink and

watercolour on card (c. 1899) to create a floral border within which is an extract of the text in her tiny handwriting, Potter also used this border design to illustrate the fairy tale's alternative English title *Sleeping Beauty*, the exhibition notes pointing out that the sepia ink gives the image an appropriately 'sleepy quality'.

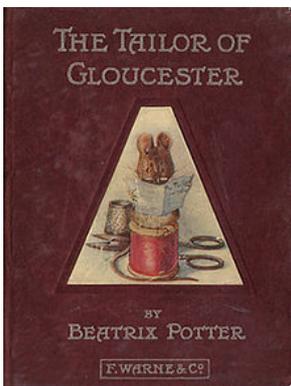
Two illustrations of *Kittens Collecting Game* in watercolour and pen and ink on paper were created for a fairy tale by the French writer Madame D'Aulnoy (c. 1650/1651–1705) called *The White Cat* (1892). Potter ignored, however, the main plot of the story that required a prince to cut off the head of a cat who was in reality a bewitched princess and concentrated on depicting cats doing what cats usually do: hunting for mice. Potter's cover (1894) in pen and ink and pencil on paper for a version of *Puss in Boots*, a fairy story popularised by French writer Charles Perrault (1628–1703), shows the artist's flair for design. The puss himself is arranged within an oval, while the story's elements are skilfully arranged amongst the rosebush tendrils in the border. [Cover can be viewed at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1267746/puss-in-boots-drawing-potter-beatrix/>.] The exhibition notes draw parallels here with border designs used by German fairy-tale artists, particularly Otto Speckter (1807–1871) whose title page (1844), adjacent to Potter's for the same story shows, as Potter's does, a pair of boots dangling from a branch that suggests that she was familiar with, and perhaps inspired by, his work.

In the 1890s Potter also penned a version of *Cinderella* (a folktale originally written down as *Cendrillon* by Perrault in 1697) a page of which, in her own script, and an early attempt at writing, is on display. There is a delightful accompanying illustration, small and detailed in grey wash and pen, of Cinderella's pumpkin coach drawn by six rabbits. [This sketch can be viewed at <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1371107/cinderellas-coach-drawn-by-three-drawing-potter-beatrix/>.] Potter's later plan to illustrate for publication a set of fairy stories sadly never came to fruition so it is fortunate that these sketches and manuscripts survive.



There are several illustrations, however, on display of Potter's own fairy tale *The Fairy Caravan* (first published in the USA in 1929 but not issued publicly in Britain until 1952) set in her beloved Lake District that follows a fairy circus through the countryside. It is interesting to see the artist's working method, and in pencil, pen and ink and china white corrections on paper, one illustration shows Mettle the Smithy Dog (a savvy terrier) in his leather apron.

In 1872, when she was six, Potter was given a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) – 'or it could have been its sequel' (1871) – referred to 'by Carroll and his contemporaries as a fairy tale', and she was captivated, particularly by John Tenniel's illustrations. Interestingly, as the exhibition notes observe, in Potter's *Alice* picture (1893) in watercolour and pen and ink over pencil on paper on display, the back view of the White Rabbit behind Bill, the unfortunate Lizard, 'looks familiar in his blue coat'. Indeed, he seems to be anticipating what would become Potter's most famous creation, Peter Rabbit. He would be joined by siblings Flopsy, Mopsy and Cottontail in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, in pen-and-ink and self-published in 1901 and published in colour to great success by Frederick Warne in 1902.



More titles followed. Inspired by a story she was told, Potter excitedly exclaimed 'I heard it in Gloucestershire and it is true!' A tailor in Gloucester had left a waistcoat ready to sew and when he returned it was finished, thus Potter's story *The Tailor of Gloucester*, self-published in 1902 and published by Warne in 1903, was born, although in *her* version it is mice not fairies that are the mysterious visitors. In the displayed illustration (1902), not used, of the mice, the watercolours, with pen and ink on paper, seem as fresh, and they really glow in the gallery's subdued lighting, as when they were first painted.

While Potter's illustrations for the fairy tales, Shakespeare and *Alice* shown in this fascinating exhibition were created for her own pleasure *and* for developing her technique, with the publication of *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* and the titles that followed that technique was perfected and her lasting fame assured.

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June Hopper Swain



The UK section of the International Board on Books for Young People

The next issue of *IBBYLink* is *IBBYLink* 58, Summer 2020 and will be on the theme of 'Families'.

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Editor: Ferelith Hordon

Associate editor: Jennifer Harding

Reviews editor: Lina Iordanaki

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