

What the Heck Is an Informational Book?



BY MELISSA STEWART

CANDACE FLEMING, ONE of America's most highly acclaimed authors of fiction and nonfiction for children, says that writing fiction is like baking a cake with ingredients you've carefully selected at a well-stocked grocery store. In other words, when we probe our imaginations for ideas, there are no limitations. Fleming compares writing nonfiction to baking a cake with a mismatched assortment of ingredients your husband

(who has never cooked a meal in his life) picked up at a small, local market.

I love this analogy because it perfectly explains the challenges of crafting a true story based on documentable facts. Nonfiction writers work long and hard to gather information, but sometimes the tantalizing tidbits we're hoping to find simply don't exist. When that happens, it can be tempting to invent dialog or imagine scenes or rearrange chronology to improve a story arc. So tempting that

we'd love a term that justifies doing so. That's why it's no surprise that some writers are currently misusing the term informational book, thinking it's a kind of nonfiction that's based on true information but takes occasional liberties with the verifiable facts.

But that is NOT a legitimate use of the term. If your goal is to write nonfiction, you can't tinker with the facts to strengthen a story. If you make up anything, anything at all, you're writing fiction. Period.

DEFINITION 1: LIBRARIANS

So what is an informational book? To answer this question, we need to jump into a time machine, strap on our seatbelts, and head back to 1876. That's when Melvil Dewey invented an ingenious book cataloging system that was quickly adopted by libraries around the world.

But the Dewey Decimal System wasn't perfect. By the early 1900s, a growing number of library patrons were complaining that it was difficult to find a good novel. That's because fiction (novels and short stories) was interspersed among all the other categories of literature (essays, letters, speeches, satire, etc.) in the 800s. In addition, all the books were organized by original language of publication, so novels by American writers were nowhere near novels by German writers or French writers.

How did librarians solve this problem? Sometime between 1905 and 1910, they started pulling novels and short story collections out of the 800s and creating a separate fiction section with books arranged alphabetically by the author's last name. Soon, librarians began calling everything left behind (still arranged according to Dewey's system) nonfiction. Besides factual books based on documented research, the nonfiction section included drama, poetry and folktales.

Eventually, librarians realized that they needed a term to describe just the factual, research-based books in the nonfiction section, and around 1970, they began calling these titles informational books. That's why the Robert F. Sibert Informational Book Medal, which is sponsored by the American Library Association, defines informational books as "those written and illustrated to present, organize, and interpret documentable, factual material."

DEFINITION 2: LITERACY EDUCATORS

But that's not the end of the story. Unaware of what was happening in the library world, in the 1980s, literacy educators began using the term informational texts to describe a narrow subset of nonfiction writing that presents information about science, history and other content areas.

According to this usage, informational books do not include biographies, how-to descriptions (instructions) or any kind of narrative writing. This definition, which is roughly equivalent to expository nonfiction, became widespread in 2000, following the publication of a landmark academic article by Nell Duke.

For a while, librarians and educators used their separate definitions with few problems. But when Congress passed the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, schools changed their funding priorities, and school library budgets started to shrink. To save their jobs, school librarians began taking on new roles, including teaching responsibilities. Not surprisingly, this led to disagreements about the proper use of the term informational books.

DEFINITION 3: COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

The confusion intensified in 2010 when the Common Core State Standards defined informational text in a much broader way, including all narrative and expository nonfiction books (the librarian definition) plus reference books, instructions, forms, maps, persuasive essays, etc. As a result, we now have three contradictory definitions floating around.

And yet, despite the contradictions and the confusion they cause, all three definitions have one thing in common. None of them condones the use of made-up material with the goal of strengthening a story. NONE.

WHAT THE HECK IS INFORMATIONAL FICTION?

Recently, some librarians and educators have begun using the term informational fiction to describe books that are largely true and accurate but not completely supported by documented research.

These books include historical fiction, like the Dear America series and picture book biographies with some made-up dialog or imagined scenes or events presented out of chronological order to improve storytelling.

They also include STEM-themed books that present concepts accurately, but contain made-up characters, fantastical art, or other embellishments. Examples include The Magic School Bus series and some animal lifecycle stories.

This helpful new term acknowledges that, in some cases, taking creative liberties with true, documentable facts can be an effective way to share ideas and information with young readers. But it also emphasizes the critical importance of distinguishing between what's real, what's true, what's verifiable and what's not.

Throughout this election season, we've seen again and again that Americans trust what they see, hear, and read too easily. They don't check facts. They don't question the source of statistics. If we want that to change, we need to teach children to identify truthiness. And one of the best ways to do that is to be transparent about the literature we create for them. Is it fact or is it fiction?

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