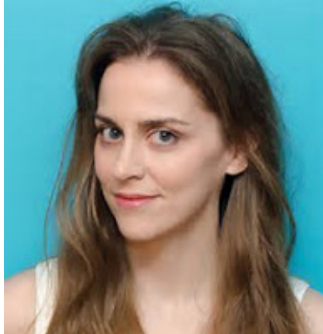




The Overlooked Benefits of Expository Nonfiction by Jess Keating



As a writer of both fiction and nonfiction, I experience a lot of variety when it comes to readers. Some kids prefer stories and narrative, while others embrace facts and figures. Both are equally valid, but as a society, we often send the message that stories and storytelling are *the* key to connecting with others. How do we connect with friends or share parts of ourselves? We tell stories. It's something we've been doing since the dawn of humanity.

Right?

But what about the kids whose strengths don't connect them like this?

When we portray narrative as the most powerful way of connecting to each other, we're leaving out a lot of kids. To dig into this, we need to look at the hidden benefits of expository nonfiction. To avoid generalizing kids and their tastes, I'll use myself as an example.

I was a “nonfiction” kid. STEM-focused. Analytical. I loved facts and figures, and clear diagrams labeling what something was, how it lived, and so on. Don't get me wrong—I loved stories (and still do!). But stories aren't as easy to share, especially when you're learning the ins and outs of your social world. If you've ever seen someone fumble the punch line of a joke (or done so yourself!), you know that even short narratives have their dangers. Some kids intuitively grasp narrative and become storytellers from a young age. But what about the rest?

In contrast, expository nonfiction is easy to share. And when something is easy to share, it has incredible social benefits.

Think of how you feel when you're attending a cocktail party, or some function where you don't know a lot of people, but want to make a good impression. That's what it's like every day for kids, especially at school. The stakes are high. They want and need to connect socially, but for those STEM-focused, “facts and figures” kids, narrative is easy to botch. It can also require long stretches of time, uninterrupted.

Yikes.

Enter expository nonfiction, to save the day. **Well crafted expository nonfiction is *all* punch line:**

“Did you know sea cucumbers breathe out their butts?”

This is a fact I share with many kids, and their response is instantaneous: they love it. But more than that, it becomes immediately apparent that they want to *share* it. It's neat. It's fun. It's just edgy enough to sound cool. For those kids, this simple, goofy fact is more than a fact: it's social ammunition. It's a doorway to open a conversation, make an impression with another kid, or catapult to a belly laugh with someone.

It's a way to express some part of *themselves*, or their personality, that's handy, simple to share, and extremely adaptable. Different kids will embrace different subjects, and that's perfect. There should be enough expository nonfiction to fit every kid's personality and interests.

By giving kids quality expository nonfiction, we give them access to more than just facts: we give them confidence. Confidence to start a discussion or join in on one. Confidence to connect with someone who has a similar mindset. A solid tidbit that embodies a kid's personality can be just as engaging as a new outfit, fancy shoes, or a well-timed story shared around the lunch table.

As a child, I felt a rush of excitement when I learned some new fact or figure. That fact was *mine*. I owned it. I couldn't wait to share it, and more than that, I felt like *I* was participating in real science, just by knowing something and passing it along. It's a remarkable feeling for a kid.

Confidence is great, but what else? We're also sending another important message when we share expository nonfiction with students. We're telling kids that facts alone can be enough. No window dressing, no intros or poignant endings. We're saying that facts can be wondrous enough to be meaningful. **Truth, at its core, is more than enough and deserves our attention.**

This might seem like a small point, but consider that this is how many kids see the world. By not focusing enough attention on expository nonfiction, are we tacitly telling kids who connect with it that their strengths and perspectives don't matter?

By invalidating or underestimating expository nonfiction, we also invalidate and underestimate the kids that speak this language: the language of facts, figures, statistics, and patterns. Every kid should feel like the lens through which they see the world is valid, and better yet, *exciting*. Expository nonfiction validates kids as *seekers* in their world, and encourages them to pursue their goals (particularly in STEM fields). It shows kids that their worldview is *valuable*, and just as worthy of attention and interest as that of any other kid.

Another hidden benefit of quality expository nonfiction lies in its essence: with it, we say that some things are knowable. To an adult, this isn't that big of a deal. But think back to when you were a kid. How much of your life was really knowable? With friend dramas, teachers, parents, difficult school subjects, and the stressors of life, what could you depend on no matter what? Suddenly, a solid truth feels like a hug.

Life can be tough and uncertain for a lot of kids, and solid facts and figures can provide a foothold in an otherwise rough climb. With STEM-focused expository nonfiction, we're showing

kids that something can be trusted and learned through a reliable method. Chimpanzees use tools. Earth orbits around the Sun. Every *known* thing builds a picture of reality that can help stabilize a tumultuous inner world.

Not all kids will relate to this, but for those who do, there's a quiet confidence to be found in knowing how trees release oxygen for the rest of us to breathe. Expository nonfiction can be a social tool, a validating perspective, and an emotional balance.

I meet expository-loving kids every day. Sometimes they're quiet. Sometimes they're class clowns. But all of them deserve to feel like their strengths and world view are valuable. Representation matters, in all facets of the word. By including expository nonfiction on our bookshelves, we're one step closer.



As a zoologist turned middle grade and picture book author, **Jess Keating** has been sprayed by skunks, bitten by crocodiles, and been a victim to the dreaded paper cut. She is the author of the award-winning and quirky 'World of Weird Animals' series, which kicked off with *Pink is for Blobfish*, the picture book biography *Shark Lady*, and middle-grade novel series *Elements of Genius*. Jess has a Master's of Science, a love of nerdy documentaries, and a pile of books threatening to take over her house.

Copyright © 2020, Melissa Stewart. May be copied for educational use but may not be reprinted or resold for commercial purposes. www.melissa-stewart.com