ELEVATING NONFICTION
in the ELA Classroom and Beyond

When fifth-grade bilingual educator **Kari Johnston** of LCpl Nicholas S. Perez Elementary School (Austin, Texas) began her teaching career, her classroom library was well stocked with fictional texts, with a few informational books sprinkled into the collection. She assumed, like many teachers and guardians, that most children gravitated to fiction.

But then Romeo, one of her students, kept devouring a nonfiction book on dinosaurs. He read it over and over and over again. "He'd [eventually] write poetry, informational texts, and even fiction about dinosaurs—like two dinosaurs in a fight because of some sort of love triangle!" she says. "He specifically loved nonfiction and would look through my boxes [for more books on dinosaurs]." Johnston says watching this unfold was a revelation. "I was thinking about the way that nonfiction lives within our spaces and our libraries . . . and noticing a gap within my own classroom."

Johnston's experience undoubtedly is seen in classrooms across the country, where nonfiction literature has often played second fiddle to fictional story books, short stories, and novels. This is due to a number of factors, from educators' personal preferences (many ELA teachers grew up loving fiction and studying it in college) to a lack of knowledge about the range of available nonfiction literature and its potential role in teaching and learning.

Fast forward several years later, and Johnston joined other NCTE leaders in an effort to elevate the wide-ranging genre. Ten contributors crafted NCTE's *Position Statement on the Role of Nonfiction (K–12)*, including the co-chair and Lesley University (Cambridge, Massachusetts) professor of language and literacy **Mary Ann Cappiello**. "I have a core belief that any book or text is a work of art and a teaching tool," Cappiello says. "With that lens, there was this

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Mary Ann Cappiello

Kari Johnston

continuing frustration. *Why is it that people don't know more about nonfiction?*" Following the release of the position statement in January 2023, NCTE orchestrated a five-part companion webinar series titled *Beyond the Nonfiction Unit: Exploring the Potential of Nonfiction Literature for Young People in K–12 Education* in June, positioning the organization as a leader in advocating for utilizing the expansive—and expanding—genre in classrooms and beyond.

ASSUMPTIONS AND SHIFTING LANDSCAPES

In the past decade or two, the range of nonfiction literature has grown exponentially. Longtime science nonfiction writer—and position statement collaborator—**Melissa Stewart** recently celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of her first book, *Life without Light: A Journey to Earth's Dark Ecosystems*. "When I started out, there was really just one kind of nonfiction—traditional nonfiction books that provide a general introduction to a topic, such as a book all about volcanoes or all about elephants," she says. Now, the genre has expanded to include all sorts of options, which she and *5 Kinds of Nonfiction* coauthor Marlene Correia categorize as active, browseable, traditional, expository literature, and narrative. Their classification system is one of several across the nonfiction landscape, all of which showcase the variety of structures, formats, and topics in nonfiction that have developed in recent decades.

It's this plethora of options that is often overlooked, says position statement co-chair **Xenia Hadjioannou,** associate professor of language and literacy education at the Berks Campus of Penn State University (Reading, Pennsylvania). "If teachers don't have the opportunities to really get to know the books that are out there, they may have a very dated understanding of what nonfiction books are like," she says. "And they may not think of them as potential tools to bring in the curriculum for anything besides a nonfiction unit."

It turns out that the common use of fictional texts for instruction or independent reading isn't necessarily aligned with many children's reading preferences. According to multiple research studies published over

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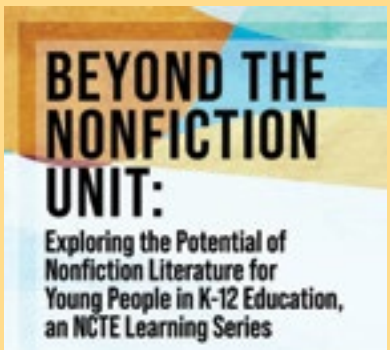

BEYOND THE NONFICTION UNIT:
Exploring the Potential of Nonfiction Literature for Young People in K–12 Education

Session 1: Overview

Session 2: Writing Instruction and Visual Literacy

Session 3: Research Processes and Information Literacy

Session 4: Critical Literacy

Session 5: Independent Reading and Reading Instruction

Access these video webinars in the NCTE Video Library: **library.ncte.org**

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Melissa Stewart

> "[Research shows] that most children like nonfiction and fiction equally, and that nonfiction is the gateway to literacy for some children."
> —*Melissa Stewart*

the past 20 years, many children prefer facts over fiction. One 2020 study led by postdoctoral researcher Samantha Ives of George Mason University (Fairfax, Virginia), for example, examined elementary students' motivation to read. Ives and her team compared reading preferences based on inherent and controlled reading motivation (reading spurred by external forces such as pressure, classroom assignments, etc.). Data indicated that students spent comparable amounts of time choosing and reading nonfiction subgenres such as science, sports, how-to, history, and autobiography/memoirs compared to fiction categories such as realistic, historical, science, and folktales or myths.

"Many educators and parents aren't aware of all that today's nonfiction has to offer young readers," Stewart says. "And they don't realize what the research is showing—that most children like nonfiction and fiction equally, and that nonfiction is the gateway to literacy for some children." But these findings shouldn't be a surprise, she adds. After all, while the publishing world views adult nonfiction and fiction equally, the same is not true for younger readers. For example, there's a *New York Times* bestseller list for both adult fiction *and* adult nonfiction, but there is no nonfiction bestseller list for children or young adults.

This bias toward selecting fiction works for younger readers is shown in sales numbers, as well. Data collected by *Publishers Weekly* reveals that while overall print sales dropped 6.5% in 2022, adult nonfiction remained the largest trade category, accounting for 61% of all books sold to adults. This balance between fiction and nonfiction is flipped for younger readers; nonfiction titles made up only 26% of juvenile book sales (ages 8–12) and just 15% of young adult book sales (ages 13–18) in 2022.

Statistics such as these show why NCTE's position statement and complementary efforts are important, working to align reading material with reader preference. Stewart believes this work is making a difference. "I think that people are now starting to understand that yes, in the same way that many adults enjoy and prefer nonfiction, many children enjoy and prefer nonfiction, too," she says.

DEFINING QUALITY

For decades, NCTE has helped to define high-quality nonfiction literature through its criteria and selection of the Orbis Pictus Award® for Outstanding Nonfiction for Children. 2023's winner, *Blue: A History of the Color as Deep as the Sea and as Wide as the Sky*, written by Nana Ekua Brew-Hammond and illustrated by Daniel Minter, exemplifies some of the characteristics, including but not limited to the following:

- Accuracy of presentation in both text and illustrative material, as well as appropriate documentation;
- Organization of material (e.g., general to specific; specific to general) that contributes to clarity and accessibility;
- Style of writing that is engaging and distinctive in its use of language;
- Style of illustration that is engaging, informative, and complementary to the text; and
- Potential contribution to the K–8 curriculum.

NCTE's position statement continues this tradition of elevating the genre, outlining a number of key ideas on how and why nonfiction literature deserves a larger role in teaching and learning.

First of all, contemporary nonfiction plays a vital role in students' reading and writing lives by supporting students' development as critically, visually, and informationally literate citizens. It can do far more than simply communicate information by doing the following:

Contemporary nonfiction plays a vital role in students' reading and writing lives by supporting students' development as critically, visually, and informationally literate citizens.

- Contextualizing primary source evidence by offering multiple perspectives and sharing new scientific discoveries.
- Addressing historical silences by exploring events rooted in racism, oppression, and violence by highlighting activists and trailblazers who have been traditionally overlooked.
- Empowering young people by informing them about current and emerging challenges relating to injustices, censorship, the climate crisis, and more.

In addition, the statement has garnered attention from a number of outlets and organizations, including *Education Week*, *The Washington Post*, *Publishers Weekly*, *School Library Journal*, and the National Science Teaching Association's *Science & Children*.

VALUABLE, UNDERUSED TOOL

There are several key areas of instruction where nonfiction literature can and should be more readily implemented in ELA curriculums and beyond, say statement collaborators. One of these areas is under the umbrella of information literacy, which has become a crucial skill for all citizens given the glut of mis- and disinformation circulating and expanding on the internet and social media.

INFORMATION LITERACY

"It is reasonable for educators to use the internet for nonfiction sources to teach information literacy," says Hadjioannou. However, relying solely on the internet misses the opportunity to use nonfiction literature to build foundational literacy skills—quality nonfiction texts lend themselves to an exploration of how

Xenia Hadjioannou

an author vets and presents information. Cappiello says that high-quality nonfiction literature may prompt a number of questions when examining the credibility of information. "How are book creators showing us how they learned the information that they needed to write the text and/or illustrate the text? How did an author curate primary sources, artifacts, and photographs for a long-form nonfiction piece?" she says.

Johnston says this issue of confronting disinformation recently emerged in her classroom, when some of her students mistakenly believed in a nefarious government plot behind testing the federal government's FEMA warning system in October 2023. "Some of my students didn't come to school that day," she says, adding that most of her fifth graders have smartphones, which comes with the added responsibility and challenge to sift through an abundance of information and sources. "Do they have the skills in place to be able to intake information, to synthesize it and evaluate it?" she asks. "Nonfiction literature allows us to do that, to ask: Whose stories

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POSITION STATEMENT ON THE ROLE OF NONFICTION LITERATURE (K–12)

To read the whole statement, visit: **ncte.org/statement/role-of-nonfiction-literature-k-12/**

To learn more about Orbis Pictus, visit: **ncte.org/awards/orbis-pictus-award-nonfiction-for-children/**

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are being told? Which perspective is this from? What is the motivation behind this? Where is the information? What is the source?"

WRITING INSTRUCTION

Nonfiction literature should also play a prominent role in writing instruction across the curriculum. High-quality nonfiction mentor texts illustrate that authors' rhetorical tactics can be just as nuanced and rich as finely crafted fiction. Take, for example, the idea that a nonfiction book can utilize a vivid hook with narrative moments, or begin with a flashback, or begin with a more climatic idea. "There are just so many different writing moves that can be taught equally with fiction or nonfiction as examples," Cappiello says. "If we want to grow robust writers engaged in author's craft, we need to give students authentic nonfiction writing opportunities—alongside fiction and poetry—and the tools and agency to make choices about their writing, from structure to voice and style to everything in between."

Johnston agrees with Cappiello's assessment, and she's been able to utilize the power of nonfiction mentor texts in teaching units focused on human rights and also during her bilingual inquiry in writing workshop time, for example. During the bilingual inquiry, students investigated and reflected on choices made as bilingual writers, studying texts like *Soldier for Equality: José de la Luz Sáenz and the Great War*

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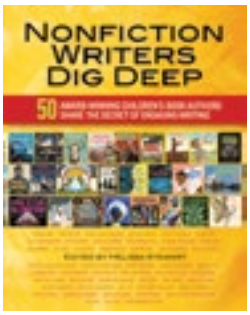
> —*Kari Johnston*

Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep
50 Award-Winning Children's Book Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing

Melissa Stewart, editor



199 pp. 2020 Grades K–12

In *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep: 50 Award-Winning Children's Book Authors Share the Secret of Engaging Writing,* some of today's most celebrated writers for children share essays that describe a critical part of the informational writing process that is often left out of classroom instruction.

To craft engaging nonfiction, professional writers choose topics that fascinate them and explore concepts and themes that reflect their passions, personalities, beliefs, and experiences in the world. By scrutinizing the information they collect to make their own personal meaning, they create distinctive books that delight as well as inform.

In addition to essays from mentor authors, *Nonfiction Writers Dig Deep* includes a wide range of tips, tools, teaching strategies, and activity ideas from editor Melissa Stewart to help students (1) choose a topic, (2) focus that topic by identifying a core idea, theme, or concept, and (3) analyze their research to find a personal connection.

By adding a piece of themselves to their drafts, students will learn to craft rich, unique prose.

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by Mexican American author and illustrator Duncan Tonatiuh. Johnston was even able to schedule a Zoom video Q&A session with Tonatiuh, during which students asked him about being a nonfiction bilingual writer, in addition to learning about insights into the writing process.

Experiences like this, she says, inspired her students to write their own picture books, which they authored and then read to students at a kindergarten class at LCpl Nicholas S. Perez. One Honduran migrant student wrote about her border crossing experience; another wrote about the plants in her mother's garden. Others wrote about futbol (soccer). "The nonfiction books we read not only inspired students [to create] their own content," Johnston says, "but also helped [them] to see themselves as readers and writers with an audience out there to share with."

This exploration of nonfiction, Cappiello adds, should not be limited to ELA classrooms. "The more examples of nonfiction we bring into the content areas, the more ways we broaden young people's writing potential through exposure."

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>
> —*Kari Johnston*

DIVERSIFYING THE CURRICULUM

Embracing nonfiction literature also allows for diversifying the curriculum. For example, *Blue: A History of the Color as Deep as the Sea and as Wide as the Sky* informs readers about the complex history and cultural connections of the color. This provides a unique perspective on the topic, which may otherwise be given a more surface-level analysis or passed over completely. Books like this, Hadjioannou says, offer new understandings for children. "There are different perspectives to topics and voices that have been traditionally marginalized," she says. "There are also people whose lives have not been traditionally represented in historical accounts or whose contributions to science have not been recognized." New nonfiction options allow teachers to enhance their instruction—and engage students—by embracing these differing and rich perspectives, which Johnston says she's seen play out in her classroom.

Over the past few years, Johnston's students—especially females—have gravitated to *Brazen: Rebel Ladies Who Rocked the World* by author and iIllustrator Pénélope Bagieu, which exemplifies the idea of celebrating voices, perspectives, and people who may not have been elevated in the past. Books like *Brazen* create a "beautiful mix between current perspectives and retelling old [or relatively unknown] stories," Johnston says. "My girls love it, and they pass it around while learning about women throughout history. It's really imperative to me as a classroom teacher that my students see their [interests], cultures, languages, and lived experiences reflected back [in our classroom library]."

MOVING FORWARD

While there is still work to do with regards to increasing the use of high-quality nonfiction literature in classrooms, the work that NCTE has led is certainly gaining traction. For her part, Johnston says her colleagues at LCpl Nicholas S. Perez have been receptive to expanding their use of nonfiction. "It's just such a naturally engaging genre that hasn't had its space," she says. "But it's been fun to watch other colleagues also get excited about their instruction again when they bring nonfiction into their classrooms."

This excitement can translate into new pathways for students to embrace and enjoy their reading and writing lives, which Stewart says is a wonderful byproduct of introducing high-quality nonfiction in the classroom. "It's important to think about teachers integrating nonfiction into the curriculum in a variety of ways, but also just giving children access to nonfiction for the joy of reading. Many children love nonfiction. They read to learn, and they're excited to soak up ideas and information. They want to understand the world and their place in it and what their possible future might look like."

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