

Kids Love Nonfiction!

Breaking down the barrier between budding scientists and the books they crave

By Melissa Stewart

In 1996, NSTA and the Children's Book Council created the Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K–12 (OSTB) list to highlight and celebrate carefully researched, finely-crafted science books that teachers should bring into their classrooms and use in instruction. In 2017, they added a complementary list, Best STEM Books K–12. Each year, volunteer committees of educators read hundreds of books, discuss their merits, and choose the ones they find most exceptional. As an author of science books for children, I am truly grateful for their time and enthusiasm. Having a book on these lists is a tremendous honor. But do they achieve their intended goal? Do teachers make the recommended books available to students? Do they use them to enrich science lessons? For the most part, the answer is “No.”

Despite NSTA's laudable efforts:

- science classrooms rarely include a library of high-quality trade titles,
- elementary classrooms contain four times more fiction than nonfiction (Dreher and Kletzien 2015), and
- science instruction is far more likely to utilize poorly written basal readers than finely crafted books with rich, engaging text, captivating art, and dynamic design.

Creating a high-quality children's nonfiction book routinely takes five years or more. Authors and illustrators pour their hearts and souls into them, and



young readers can absolutely tell the difference. Trade books have the power to inspire as well as inform. They can ignite a student's passion for science.

A broader look at trends in children's publishing helps to explain why the OSTB and Best STEM lists have so little impact on educators' book-buying decisions. Overall, nonfiction accounts for just one-quarter of all children's book sales (Milliot 2022). If you aren't surprised by that statistic, you should be because nonfiction accounts for a whopping two-thirds of adult book sales, and science is one of the hottest categories.

Why the discrepancy? Even though many adults enjoy reading nonfiction themselves, they mistakenly believe children prefer fiction. It's an implicit bias that permeates our society and is perpetuated by the media.

Why is this unfortunate misconception so pervasive? Perhaps it's because adults who prefer fiction themselves assume children feel the same way. Or maybe they recall being required to read dry, encyclopedic texts when they were young and have no idea how much the genre has changed and expanded in recent years. Regardless of the reason, now is the time to make a change.

Research shows that as many as 75 percent of young readers enjoy nonfiction as much as or more than fiction, and fact-loving analytical thinkers get particularly excited about reading to learn (Clark and Teravainen-Goff 2020; Correia 2011; Mohr 2006; Repaskey, Schumm, and Johnson 2017). For them, nonfiction can be the gateway to literacy (Caswell and Duke 1998) as well as a portal to knowledge that fuels their natural curiosity and sense of wonder. When these students lack access to the nonfiction books they crave, they may lose their enthusiasm for reading and learning (Moss and Hendershot 2002).

“Children want their nonfiction books; adults may be their barriers,” says Heather Simpson, Chief Program Officer for Room to Read, a nonprofit organization focused on improving literacy and gender equality in education; she continues, “A child learning how to read with fiction texts alone misses a unique opportunity to pique an independent interest in reading.”

If we want the United States to be a global innovation leader, we must foster all the potential STEM talent our country has to offer. We need to cultivate the curiosity of budding scientists, and one way to do that is by nurturing and nourishing their minds with books they find fascinating.

Here are five ways you can begin addressing the problem today:

- If your students show a preference for nonfiction, respect and encourage their choices. Don’t try to steer them toward fiction. Once they become confident readers, they will begin to explore a broad range of books on their own.

- Do an audit of your classroom library. If it’s less than 50 percent nonfiction, make a plan to systematically add more nonfiction over time. Be on the lookout for grants to fund book purchases.
- Think carefully about the books you select for read-alouds. If fewer than 50 percent are nonfiction, download the recommended nonfiction read-aloud lists on my website for suggestions (see Online Resources).
- Share a list of upcoming science units with your school librarian or the children’s librarian at your local public library. Ask them to help you locate finely crafted books that you can incorporate into lessons.
- Spread the word—kids love nonfiction. As more teachers, librarians, parents, and caregivers become aware of the critical role nonfiction can play in the lives of children, we can break down the barrier between children and the books they crave.

REFERENCES

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ONLINE RESOURCES

Best STEM Books K-12
www.nsta.org/best-stem-books-k-12

National Council of Teachers of English Nonfiction Position Statement
<https://ncte.org/statement/role-of-nonfiction-literature-k-12/>

Outstanding Science Trade Books for Students K-12
www.nsta.org/outstanding-science-trade-books-students-k-12

Recommended Nonfiction Read Alouds
www.melissa-stewart.com/educators/sharing_expository_nf.html

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Melissa Stewart (melissa@melissa-stewart.com) is a scientist, educator, and author of more than 200 STEM-themed nonfiction books for children, including seventeen that appeared on NSTA’s OSTB list. She co-wrote *5 Kinds of Nonfiction: Enriching Reading and Writing Instruction with Children’s Books* and contributed to the National Council of Teachers of English’s newly-adopted Position Statement on the Role of Nonfiction Literature (K-12).