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Tell Me a (Real) Story:

The Demand for Literary Nonfiction

One can hardly pick up a professional journal these days without reading about nonfiction, particularly as it relates to the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The demand for the integration of nonfiction into classrooms is made abundantly clear:

> [T]he Standards demand that a significant amount of reading of informational texts take place in and outside the ELA classroom. Fulfilling the Standards for 6–12 ELA requires much greater attention to a specific category of informational text—literary nonfiction—than has been traditional (Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Reading, p. 5).

This call for "literary nonfiction" has led to much confusion and debate. What is literary nonfiction and how does it differ from nonfiction in general? How does literary nonfiction support the goal of CCSS? What is the value of literary nonfiction? What resources are present to assist educators in locating and using quality literary nonfiction with students? These key questions need answers from those who know and understand nonfiction and its applications in the ELA classroom. Much professional development is being offered that ignores these key questions. The purpose of this article is to attempt to provide answers. Before teachers move forward with model frameworks and other curricular decisions, it is essential that a clear understanding of literary nonfiction is paramount.

Toward a Cohesive Definition

The term *nonfiction* is, basically, a definition of a genre by contradiction or negation. A search using the term *literary nonfiction* yields the following definitions:

- Nonfiction that reads like fiction and includes elements of fiction (plot, characters, conflict, etc.).
- A branch of writing that employs literary techniques usually associated with poetry to report on actual facts.
- Literary nonfiction is also called narrative nonfiction and creative nonfiction. It includes travel writing, essays, autobiography, memoir, biography, sports writing, science writing, and nature writing.
- Literary nonfiction is when an author uses facts and research to create a story with no "made-up parts."
- Literary nonfiction is dramatic true stories that can explore a variety of subjects.
- Nonfiction is biography, autobiography, memoir, and informational texts.

However, a search of the standard textbooks in the field of literature for children and young adults yields different results. *Through the Eyes of a Child* (Norton, 2010), *Children's Literature Briefly* (Tunnell, Jacobs, Young, & Bryan, 2011) and the classic *Literature for Today's Young Adults* (Nilsen, Blasingame, Nilsen, & Donelson, 2012) offer definitions of nonfiction more along the lines of the following:

- Informational books (nonfiction) present knowledge that is accurate and verifiable.
- Nonfiction includes biography, autobiography, and informational texts.
- Nonfiction is based on fact and not imagination.
- Facts and information about

nonfiction are uppermost with storytelling used as an expressive technique.

To add to the confusion is the fact that the CCSS documents (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) also offer conflicting views of nonfiction. CCSS make a distinction between nonfiction and what they term *informational texts,* including literary nonfiction, and offer the types of these texts within the K–5 and the 6–12 Reading Standards' discussion (pp. 5, 10, 35, 31, 37). It is quite difficult to determine the distinctions among these terms since they are used in a rather haphazard and inconsistent fashion. However, the CCSS does delineate some specific kinds of nonfiction for use in the classroom. Included for K–5 are these types of informational texts:

- biography
- autobiography
- books about history, science, and the arts
- technical texts
  - directions
  - forms
  - graphs
  - charts
  - maps
  - digital sources (p. 31)

The informational text types for grades 6–12 include:

- personal essays
- speeches
- opinion pieces
- essays
- biographies
- memoirs
- journalism
- historic/scientific/technical/economic texts
- digital sources (p. 57)

Autobiographies, then, are appropriate for K–5, but the Standards list memoirs for grades 6–12. Technical texts are delineated for younger readers but not for young adults. Vague descriptions (journalism, historic texts) are listed with little or no elaboration. Given that forms, formats, and genres are shifting and evolving constantly, perhaps this is not as surprising as it appears on the surface. Lines are blurring between and among genres; definitions of what is a *text* are also changing with the advent of more electronic forms and formats. Even the design of nonfiction demonstrates the evolution of the genre.

What is needed is a consensus among educational stakeholders (teachers, librarians, administrators, parents, curriculum writers, etc.) about the term *literary nonfiction* and what will qualify as such as new curricula demand its use in larger percentages. (As much as 70% of reading across high school grade levels should be literary nonfiction, according to CCSS.) Moreover, the idea that there might exist a "non-literary" or "non-creative" nonfiction is disturbing. The term that seems to make most sense here is *narrative* nonfiction—nonfiction that tells a story. This term combines the emphasis on fact and information as well as on story. It includes those types of books already being mentioned in much of the CCSS literature: autobiography, biography, informational texts, and memoir (though a discussion about the artificial distinction between *autobiography* and *memoir* needs some closer examination as well). It also includes the element of *story*

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rather than the more amorphous concept of being literary or creative. Narrative nonfiction is informational and it is literary. Perhaps educators would be well served to establish a terminology that is consistent.

The Value of Nonfiction

There has been a great deal of consternation expressed about the demands for more nonfiction within the CCSS. I understand this concern because I know that the background I brought to my ELA classes in the late 1970s is not very different from the background educators are bringing with them in the 21st century. As an English major, I had countless courses that included the reading and discussion of the classics. Most of those classics were fiction, however. Few, if any, of my college courses included nonfiction. There was an occasional essay, of course, but the focus was squarely on fiction. So, as I was developing my classroom library, booktalking to students, and reading to stay abreast of YA books, I seldom turned to nonfiction. Today, however, I am quite likely to turn

to nonfiction for pleasure reading, to include nonfiction among the required reading for my YA class, and to include nonfiction as I present staff development. What changed over the years?

The first change occurred early in my teaching career as I watched kids gravitate toward certain books when we visited the school library. See if this scenario sounds familiar: at one table is a group of students chatting and laughing and pointing as they turn the pages of *The Guinness Book of World Records*. At another table, kids have taken out paper and pencils and are trying to replicate drawings in one of Lee J. Ames's *Draw 50* books. A couple of girls are checking out the latest biography of a pop idol (in my time, it was New Kids on the Block and Vanilla Ice), while a handful are scanning the shelf of sports biographies looking for one they might have missed. I usually headed right to the fiction stacks, but not all of my students did the same. Obviously, there was interest in books other than fiction.

The real jolt happened when I asked one of my students why he self-defined as a nonreader on a survey I had conducted with the class. I saw him reading during silent reading time. He carried books with him. He checked books out of the library. Surely these were the behaviors of a reader, right? Basically, his response was that the reading he did was not the same type of reading he saw in most of his ELA classes. Reading biographies of basketball stars or reading drawing books or browsing the *Guinness Book of World Records* (Glenday, 2009) was not deemed reading by his previous teachers, so he began to define himself as a nonreader. I wondered then (and still do) how many students we lose because our working definition of reading is too narrow or limited?

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Reading nonfiction fits easily into the different stages in the development of lifelong readers. For unconscious delight, the reading of serial nonfiction allows readers to become "lost in a book," enjoying that time when the real world slips away as we are reading. For some, this means specializing in a particular series of informational books, such as *Greatest Stars of the NBA* (Finkel, 2004). This series combines the narrative techniques of biography with the format of graphic novels and manga. Here is informational text that blurs genre boundaries, that combines forms and formats. Serial reading could also mean reading the works of some of the leading authors of biographies and autobiographies, such as Russell Freedman, or reading the narrative nonfiction of Susan Campbell Bartoletti, Steve Sheinkin, or Sue Macy. It might take the form of students seeking out books about historical periods of interest to them, perhaps moving from *Freedom's Children* (Levine, 1993) to *Claudette Colvin: Twice toward Justice* (Hoose, 2009) to Dionne Graham's audio narration of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letters from Birmingham Jail* (2013).

If students prefer to read for vicarious experiences, another stage in the development of lifelong readers, there are many subjects and topics to peruse. Instead of simply reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* (Frank, Frank, Pressler, & Massotty, 1995), we might offer the graphic novel biography authorized by the Anne Frank House (Jacobson and Colon, 2010), which might lead to the rendition of the 911 report by these same graphic novelists. Then one might move on to other works set during the Holocaust, including *Hitler Youth* (Bartoletti, 2005), *Surviving the Angel of Death* (Kor & Buccieri, 2009), and *I Have Lived a Thousand Years* (Jackson, 1997).

Reading autobiographically might lead a student to read books about topics that touch on their own lives. Books about health and beauty—like *Lauren Conrad Beauty* (Conrad & Loehnen, 2012), *Seventeen 500 Health & Fitness Tips: Eat Right, Work Out Smart, and Look Great!* (Foye, 2011)—or books about college and career like *Seventeen's Guide to Getting into College: Know Yourself, Know Your Schools, & Find Your Perfect Fit!* (Fenderson, 2008) or books about careers, culture, compromise, and a myriad of other topics.

Certainly there is nonfiction that also causes readers to grapple with more philosophical issues, another important stage of reader development. Books about racism and prejudice, about war, poverty, population growth, climate change, the environment, pollution, and other topics can assist readers in not only finding the facts and figures for a report, but also informing them about choices they must make as consumers and human beings.

I already had evidence that my own students were reading for aesthetic experiences, the final stage in the development of lifelong readers. There was obviously value in reading nonfiction. The question for me was, *how do I fill in my own reading gaps and develop my collection to include more nonfiction?* Though this was a question I considered decades ago, it is still a viable and essential question for teachers entering classrooms today under the CCSS demand for increasing exposure to nonfiction.

Resources for Locating Narrative Nonfiction for Students

Of course, given the emphasis on CCSS means educators are scrambling to locate exemplary narrative nonfiction so that they can develop model frameworks, write curriculum to address the Anchor Standards, and supplement their own reading to include more narrative nonfiction. CCSS provides what they call Exemplar Texts—suggestions for texts to be used in building new lessons. They do point out, however disingenuously, that these are not the only texts that could be used. That is a relief since they list only *five* (!) texts for middle school grades. Churchill, Frederick Douglas, John Adams, and John Steinbeck get nods at this level, along with Ann Petry's bio of Harriet Tubman (2007). For high school, the list includes Washington, Lincoln, Paine, FDR, Patrick Henry, and Ronald Reagan, along with a very few authors who are not white: Angelou, Anaya, and Tan. Given this paucity of resources, where can teachers turn for more narrative nonfiction?

My first answer is this: turn to your school librarians. They have much to offer. Their books are free of charge, too. Talk to the school librarian about books for topics and subjects you plan to use within your curriculum. Certified school librarians know the collection and can assist teachers in all subject matters by locating resources, books, and other materials. Here are some other resources that should prove valuable:

1. Excellence in Nonfiction Award from the Young Adult Library Services of the American Library Association (YALSA). Presented in 2010 for the first time, this award recognizes distinction in nonfiction for YA readers. Winners may be located here: http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistsawards/bookawards/nonfiction/previous.
2. The Sibert Award for Nonfiction from the Association of Library Services to Children (ALSC). First presented in 2001, this award is for distinction in nonfiction for children. However, since the age range for these books extends to age 14, there are plenty of good YA nonfiction titles from which to select. The list of winners, past and present, may be found here: http://www.ala.org/alsc/awardsgrants/bookmedia/sibertmedal/sibertpast/sibertmedalpast.
3. One of the oldest awards for nonfiction, the Orbis Pictus Award from the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) has been awarded since 1990. The award includes one winning title, a handful of honor books, and a list of recommended titles as well. Current winners and links to winning titles from the past are located here: http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus.
4. Children's Book Council (CBC). Since 1972, the CBC and content area professional organizations have produced two lists: Notable Books in the Social Studies and Notable Outstanding Science Trade Books. You can link to past lists here for social studies: http://www.socialstudies.org/notable. Links for science are here: http://www.cbcbooks.org/readinglists.php?page=outstandingscience.
5. Reviewing journals such as *VOYA*, *SLJ*, *Booklist*, and *The Horn Book* review nonfiction regularly. Lists of those books receiving starred reviews are generally a good place to begin.

Become a nonfiction detective. If you are not already part of a PLN, begin to build one using Twitter, Tumblr, and blogs. See what books are getting the "buzz." Right now, my favorite new piece of nonfiction is called *Bad for You* (Pyle, 2013), a book that seamlessly blends nonfiction in the graphic novel format. Chapters discuss things that others believe are bad for teens, including play, comics, and video games. Members of my PLN are suggesting titles such as the Scientists in the Field series and the Discover More series. Individual titles include *Temple Grandin* (Montgomery, 2012), *Invincible Microbe* (Murphy & Blank, 2012), and *Impossible Rescue* (Sandler, 2012). Look inside your classroom as well.

Lurk and watch. See what narrative nonfiction appeals to readers in your classroom. Are they reading

memoirs? Why? Or why not? Do certain topics and subjects appeal across age and gender and other factors? What are they? If CCSS remain as the dictate for many states, we need to assess where our readers are in terms of reading nonfiction and plan how we will introduce them to other types of narrative nonfiction in a way that motivates them to read for more than just a test.

Finally, a Challenge for Us All

The emphasis on nonfiction or reading of informational texts should be one I welcome. But I do have some concerns. David Coleman, one of the key "architects" for the new Standards, points to the need for nonfiction so that students will be more prepared for college and career; thus the push for nonfiction within CCSS. He insists that readers gain "world knowledge" through nonfiction, a knowledge that is absent from fiction. The CCSS call for increasing emphasis on informational texts, about a 70–30 ratio in high school. This de-valuing and de-emphasis on fiction might also result in the loss of readers.

If we are not to be restricted to the rather confining nature of the CCSS Exemplar Texts, we need to challenge ourselves to read more and to read more widely. I generally begin with the award winners, if they are books I have not already read. Here are five of the most recent award recipients for you to browse (and even better, read). *Bomb: The Race to Build--and Steal--the World's Most Dangerous Weapon* by Steve Sheinkin (2012), the winner of the Excellence in Nonfiction Award from YALSA, the Sibert Award from ALSC, and a Newbery Honor winner, is a powerful story that has, at its heart, spies and intrigue and political maneuverings. Given all the accolades, this might just be the perfect place to begin reading and discovering the wonderful world of narrative nonfiction available for today's educators and students. *We've Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children's March* (2012) by Cynthia Levinson was also recognized with multiple awards. *No Crystal Stair: A Documentary Novel of the Life and Work of Lewis Michaux, Harlem Bookseller* (2012) by Vaunda Micheaux Nelson combines fact and story in a documentary novel format. *Titanic: Voices from the Disaster* (2012), written by Deborah Hopkinson, and *Moonbird: A Year on the Wind with the Great Survivor B95* (2012), written by Phillip Hoose, received both the Sibert and the Excellence in Nonfiction Award this year. Challenge yourself and your colleagues to "mind the gap" and read more narrative nonfiction to share with your classes.

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