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. Filling 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.

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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 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, but I have to question the relationship between the CCSS and ELA. Are we being asked to teach a new genre? Or are students being asked to shift their reading, their approach, and their response in ways that might become more important as we consider the demands of our technologically laden world?
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 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 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 stage of reader development. 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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/booklistawards/bookawards/nonfiction/previous](http://www.ala.org/yalsa/booklistawards/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](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.
4. 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](http://www.ncte.org/awards/orbispictus).
6. 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 assist them in further developing their hobbies.
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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References


Trade Book References


2014 Call for CEL Award for Exemplary Leadership

Please nominate an exceptional leader who has had an impact on the profession through one or more of the following: 1) work that has focused on exceptional teaching and/or leadership practices (e.g., building an effective department, grade level, or building team; developing curricula or processes for practicing English language arts educators; or mentoring); 2) contributions to the profession through involvement at both the local and national levels; 3) publications that have had a major impact. This award is given annually to an NCTE member who is an outstanding English language arts educator and leader. Your award nominee submission must include a nomination letter discussing the nominee’s accomplishments and a CV. Submit your nomination letter and nominations to the CEL Award Committee at ncte@ncte.org. Deadline: October 1, 2014.
Alan Alda - Tell me a story. The Conversation/ANU, CC BY1.6 MB (download). Alan: What we try to teach is, first of all, not dumbing down the science. Alan: One of the things that I try to do is, try to spread the idea of what a story is. If you’re not accustomed to telling stories, sometimes you can reduce everything to the final, the bottom line thing, there’s not much of a story in that. Will: I’ve always thought, everyone is used to stories in the sense that everyone hears stories all the time. We watch TV, we read books, those kinds of things, so we’ve got an implicit understanding of it but it’s a very different to tell the story. Alan: Yes. An example is what we’re doing at the World Science Festival in Brisbane. We combine art and science. In general, fiction refers to plot, settings, and characters created from the imagination, while nonfiction refers to factual stories focused on actual events and people. For writers and readers alike, it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference between fiction and nonfiction. In general, fiction refers to plot, settings, and characters created from the imagination, while nonfiction refers to factual stories focused on actual events and people. However, the difference between these two genres is sometimes blurred, as the two often intersect. Before we go any further, it’s important to note that both fiction and nonfiction can be utilized in any medium (film, television, plays, etc.). Here, we’re focusing on the difference between fiction and nonfiction in literature. They tell courtship stories, marriage stories, stories of affairs and divorces. But what I found most interesting about these books is that they also tell stories about storytelling itself, thinking hard about the way we think, talk, and write about marriage—to ourselves, to each other, and to others. Clancy Martin’s Love and Lies: An Essay on Truthfulness, Deceit, and the Growth and Care of Erotic Love explores the way we lie in our closest relationships: as children, as parents, as lovers, as spouses, and even to ourselves. He writes: “The story I told myself was simple: that love operates without reason. That it was foolish to try to understand it, or to pretend that I could control how it arrives or the hour it escapes.”
And so, to tell a great story, the number one thing you have to do is evoke a reaction. The end. If you do it right, your audience will be willing to sit down and pay attention to you for longer than they normally would. Think about it—so many people binge watch Game of Thrones or House of Cards for 15 hours a day on the weekend. People will sit and have a Marvel movie marathon and spend the next 24 hours straight watching Marvel movies. Understand there’s a real science in this, a real storytelling battle going on right now in these platforms and understanding that you as an individual act differently when you go into a boardroom and to a business meeting than you would when you go out with your girls to Las Vegas for the weekend than when you would when you go out. Tell Me a Story - Long ago, in Kentucky, I, a boy, stood. 

Long ago, in Kentucky, I, a boy, stood. By a dirt road, in first dark, and heard The great geese hoot northward. I could not see them, there being no moon And the stars sparse. I heard them. I did not know what was happening in my heart. It was the season before the elderberry blooms, Therefore they were going north. The sound was passing northward. [B]. Tell me a story.