

editor's comments

Non-Fiction for Children: Does It Really Exist?

by Perry Nodelman

In his article about biography in the special section of this issue, William H. Epstein speaks of his young daughters' bafflement when their grade two teachers insisted that the biographies they were studying were different from other sorts of books they had read—that it was *important* that this sort of writing was about people who had once actually been alive. It's intriguing that, without the teachers' guidance, these children didn't find that main distinction between fiction and non-fiction interesting, and would not have considered it significant. We tend to believe that one of the biggest dangers of giving children fiction to read is that they will confuse the inventions of novelists with actual reality; indeed, most arguments for censorship of children's books are based on the assumption that children will model their behavior on that of fictional characters because they are gullible enough to believe that all fiction accurately describes reality. Yet these children seem to have had the opposite problem—they seem not to have realized that some books can indeed actually be about real life, so that they needed to be taught the significance of a connection between what's in books and the world outside of books, the world in which we live.

Given the overall character of children's books and also of children's television and movies, however, I suspect that these children are anything but unusual. The would-be censors are wrong: children who have been raised on a steady diet of the books that children usually read and the TV that children usually watch are not likely to have reached the conclusion that books can and do describe the world which we actually perceive with our own senses. Not only is most children's entertainment fiction, but even those books and TV shows which announce themselves as non-fiction actually describe a world that never has existed and that never could exist.

Indeed, it seems to be quite deliberate that the non-fiction we produce for young children is indistinguishable from fiction. Too many adults believe that facts about the real world are basically uninteresting, and that learning about them is basically boring. Consequently, we like to "make learning fun"—and in doing so, I suspect, we inevitably imply that it isn't actually fun at all—or else why would we have to work so hard to make it seem like fun? So children learn the not-so-well-hidden message that the act of thinking is inherently boring from books designed to make it seem to be anything but.

Such books, and just about all non-fiction television and film for children, almost always also include fictional elements. They actually *are* fiction.

In children's non-fiction, it's never just, "Here's some interesting information about electricity"; it's a whole story about how some fictional children meet a fictional magician who takes them on a series of adventures in which they happen to learn

about electricity. It's never just a description of history that's interesting because it happened, it's a cartoon involving a time machine. It's never just instructions in making fudge, it's instructions from a fictional talking duck who painlessly introduces fudge-making in the course of slapstick jokes involving falling into the pots and such.

In purportedly non-fictional books like Richard Scarry's *What Do People Do All Day*, the people of the title turn out to be talking hedgehogs and worms and cats. On television shows like *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood*, non-fictional information about animals and machines is provided by, and earnest discussions about non-fictional subjects like friendship and shoplifting are carried on by, cartoon images and cloth effigies of frogs and dogs and weirdly fantastic monsters. The common wisdom is that children "identify" with these perversely unrealistic creatures, and thus can effortlessly absorb the non-fictional information that the fictional situation is designed to teach. Why a young human being would "identify" with a talking frog more than with a talking child is beyond me; and if we really believed that children consider talking frogs made out of tacky polyester to be authoritative voices of wisdom, we would make tacky frog costumes the standard uniform for teachers and crossing guards—and parents. As a parent, I refuse to wear one; I have the sneaking suspicion that it might diminish the effectiveness of "Turn out the light right now, it's past your bedtime," or "Stop complaining and eat your peas." I suspect the truth of the matter is that children feel comfortable with talking cloth frogs simply because they've encountered so many other similar creatures in their earlier experiences of books and television. They know them as fiction, and identify the world they live in as a place quite different from the real one, in which even nice teachers aren't all-forgiving as talking frogs. They do not so much identify *with* such creatures as identify them *as* fictional and basically harmless—safely unreal enough so that you don't really have to take them all that seriously.

This training in the fictionality of the world of books begins even in those books intended for the youngest of children. Most of these announce themselves as non-fiction; they are usually word books, and their purpose is to offer non-fictional information, the names or labels that we attach to specific objects. Yet as in Scarry's books, the characters in them are more often talking animals than they are people—and in a surprising number of them, the animals are farm animals like lambs and piglets, actual examples of which most urban infants are not likely to have set eyes on. We demand of babies that they must learn the concept of these otherwise unknown animals and the peculiar reality of the fictional world they inhabit before the babies can even get around to the more obvious and much simpler learning of the names of things like chairs or apples that they do actually experience. If babies do

recognize the world of these books, it can only be because it mirrors and reinforces the world implied by their toys—also all cartoon images, almost all images of animals or of actually non-existent creatures.

I am not suggesting that this intrusion of fiction into non-fiction is not fun, or even that it does not teach words, or electricity or fudge-making, or even the values of friendship. I am suggesting that in making non-fiction fictional, we are merely confirming again and again that books and TV are not ever about life as we actually experience it. In non-fiction as in fiction, the world as described in books for young children is always fictional, always different from the world we believe to be real.

To be sure, some baby books contain actual photographs of objects—and what could be more accurately real than that? But in these photographs as in the cartoons in other books, the objects depicted and made available for labelling are nothing like similar objects in a baby's reality. In books like Platt and Munk's *Baby's Things*, the apples are unfailingly shiny and perfect, without marks or flaws or worm-holes; the high chairs are clean and freshly painted, without foodstains or tooth-marks. Everything looks ravishingly desirable, bright and clean and new. The world as depicted in most children's books both fictional and non-fictional is like the world of these photographs—a perfect place one might desire rather than the ordinary place that these pictures might well teach one to be discontent with.

Given the cleanliness and flawlessness of this world, it is no wonder that the characters in children's books find it so easy to come to terms with their self-images, or to learn about fudge without burning themselves or about electricity without having parents complain about having to go out and spend a fortune on the equipment. Life is easier in children's non-fiction than it is in my house. And it is no wonder, even, that lives in children's biographies can be so perfectly exemplary, so tidily representative of values that children need to know. A series available in Canada by mail order a few years ago offered the lives of famous people in such a way that each of them comes to be representative of one important virtue—thus Confucius represents Honesty, and Louis Pasteur represents Believing in Yourself. Their wives and mothers might have been surprised (and annoyed) by this dedicated singlemindedness; few people I know are so one-sided in either their vices or their virtues as to be perfect allegories. Yet these books are just extreme examples of a common feature of children's biography; paradoxically, William Epstein's daughters had to learn that biography describes real people so that they would accept the real truth of the simplistic and decidedly unrealistic messages that are usual in biographies intended for young readers.

Indeed, the most distressing fiction in children's non-fiction is its simplistic interpretations of factual information. Perhaps the fictionality of children's non-fiction is inherent even in the idea that we need a special non-fiction for young readers—the idea that young readers can only accommodate and therefore need to be provided with simpler version of reality than the more accurately complex ones provided for adults. Our knowledge that reality is always more complex than most children's non-fiction suggests forces us to acknowledge that most children's non-fiction deliberately tells lies to children, presumably in the faith that it is for their own good.

Not surprisingly, it is the fictionality of children's non-fiction that has most interested a number of the contributors to the

special section in this issue. Miriam Youngerman Miller reveals the extent to which children's books offer a distorted image of the middle ages, and Billie Nodelman explores how science books express non-scientific values; and William Epstein shows how even the *concept* of biography is an imposition of fiction on our consciousness of reality.

And that, I suppose, is the inevitable conclusion that any exploration of non-fiction must reach. All non-fiction—and not just that intended for children—must always be fictional, always represent a specific limited view of reality rather than anything like an absolutely objective reality in itself. There probably is no such thing as non-fiction, just as there is probably no such thing as reality. All writing emerges from, and inevitably expresses, the conscious and unconscious prejudices of its writer; and what is real for a writer might not be real for a reader, or for another writer. We all live inside of novels—I am the central character in mine, but I am sure I am merely a minor figure in yours. Some of these novels, those inhabited by scientists, claim to total objectivity—but they too distort reality, by leaving out the distortions of subjectivity, and by the extent to which their central focus on “objectivity” is a not necessarily logical choice. There may be one real world outside all these different novels about it—a real world in which there exists no prejudices or distortions—but no human being is ever likely to know or be much concerned with what it's actually like. From the viewpoint of humanity, reality is fiction.

All that may lead to the conclusion that there is nothing special about non-fiction—that it's just fiction like all the rest, and should be treated like all the rest. Yet the distinction those grade two teachers tried to teach William Epstein's daughters are important—important fiction, if you like: we do believe that non-fiction has a different relationship with “reality” than does fiction, and it is important that we understand the difference and use it in our encounters with books. Children may need to learn that fiction is not real, not so much so that they won't try to jump off high buildings just like Superman does as so that they can acknowledge and enjoy its unreality; but they also need to learn that non-fiction is not real in a special and different way than novels, so that they will understand the necessity of comparing its vision of the truth with their own. We need more factual books for children that are less obviously fictional, so that children can learn to make these sometimes subtle distinctions. In dwelling on the fictionality of non-fiction in ways that might surprise us, the contributors to this issue point to our specific responsibility in regard to children's experience of factual books: to use our own consciousness of fictionality to ensure that the children are not gullible enough to believe that any one fiction presented to them as non-fiction is indeed the whole and only truth.

This is my last set of comments, indeed my last issue, as Editor of the *Quarterly*. It has been a frenzied and fascinating five years. In addition to editing the contents of twenty *Quarterlies*—about two hundred articles and a huge pile of columns and book reviews—I have written many thousands of letters to contributors and would-be contributors. I happily give up the labor, but I want to thank the ChLA for giving me the opportunity to do it. I have learned much about children's literature. I have also learned much about matters like sympathy and patience, although perhaps less than some of those

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thinking as they move West. In order to write such imaginary diaries, the students must be aware of the need for accurate, clear information in order to flesh out their imaginary train trips in authentic ways, but they are also working with the power of written language to convey personal experiences in the frames of literature. Both modes of inquiry, that of social studies and that of literature, are essential to revealing rich understandings of human experience. Through writing built on writers' crafts in non-fiction as well as fiction, students return to texts to develop and evaluate meanings and move beyond to create new texts enriched with newly found personal meanings.

Perhaps what is most illuminating in Patricia Froelich's fifth grade history classes is that a well-read teacher with a clear framework of understanding about literature and students who engage daily in literary study do not separate literature from their ongoing studies and living. They use this literary perspective as one way to reveal personal meanings which are different from the generalizations usually learned in history and social studies inquiry. Patricia Froelich's main contribution to establishing literary criticism in the elementary school is in her movement away from the arbitrary separation of history and literature, of fiction and non-fiction.

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would-be contributors would have liked; and I have learned much about proof-reading, although perhaps less than readers of the *Quarterly* would have liked. I am proud of the progress of the *Quarterly* in the past five years; but I happily turn this column and the job that goes with it over to Rod McGillis, in

the confidence that he will make the *Quarterly* something different from what I might myself have imagined but exactly as fine as I ever could have hoped for.

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