

Kathleen T. Isaacs

# Picturing the World

Informational Picture Books  
for Children



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**KATHLEEN T. ISAACS** spent many years as a teacher, with intermittent stints as a school and public librarian. She has taught in schools and universities in Baltimore, Washington, Hong Kong, and Xi'an, China, and has traveled extensively in many parts of the world. She has chaired selection committees for ALSC's Sibert Award, ALSC's Notable Children's Books, and USBBY's Outstanding International Book Committees, and twice served as a member of ALSC's Newbery Award committee. Most recently, she has been teaching children's literature in the education program at Towson University in Maryland. She regularly contributes articles and reviews to professional publications.

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# 1

## What Are Informational Picture Books?

What we too often forget when considering the importance of nonfiction reading is the pleasure, the art, the wonder of it. We do not want to develop students who read nonfiction just for function, or for school success, but students who read nonfiction for enjoyment, to be fascinated, to discover.

—NELL DUKE<sup>1</sup>

**W**HAT ARE INFORMATIONAL BOOKS? “Great stories that have the added advantage of being true.” That’s how Dinah Stevenson, longtime children’s book editor and publisher, described them as we chatted in her ALA exhibit booth, surrounded by new and intriguing titles (pers. comm.). Nearly all informational books are about concrete subjects, things that can be seen and heard and touched, the lives of real people, places that can be visited, or the stories of real events. That connection with the real world is the heart of the attraction of informational books. “Kids . . . want to know truths,” Susan Kuklin, a prolific nonfiction author, wrote about her work.<sup>2</sup> Parents and teachers seeking to encourage young people to become readers will find such books an excellent bridge between their children’s lives and personal interests and the larger world waiting for their discovery. For young children, parents and teachers begin with picture books.

FACING PAGE ART FROM

*Book Fiesta* by Pat Mora

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HarperCollins Children’s Books.

From birth—and perhaps even before—children strive to learn about the world around them. Throughout their childhood, books help in this task. Books with pictures are a natural starting point, since visual literacy starts long before a child can decode words on a page. Well before children can read, they can follow the pictures and put together the information they need to ask and answer questions and to grasp a story. For early readers, pictures continue to provide helpful cues to the text. Even for adults, it's said, a picture is worth a thousand words. Today, in a world of ubiquitous screens and images, children expect to learn about their world through pictures. And advances in laser scanning technology and other changes in book production over the last forty years have made it possible to produce reasonably priced books with astonishing images on every page. A wealth of attractive and interesting picture books has been the result. Those that are factual, as well, are informational picture books.

“We are in the Golden Age of Picture Book Biography,” author and blogger Marc Tyler Nobleman writes.<sup>3</sup> He argues that informational picture books are really for all ages, splendid introductions to a subject because “concise writing is in high demand,” and “everyone likes pictures.” On another blog, hosted by a group of nonfiction authors, there was extensive discussion of the importance of picture books in late 2010, reacting to a controversial *New York Times* article about the genre.<sup>4</sup> “The form . . . allows readers time and space to contemplate the science ideas as they look back and forth between the visuals and the text,” wrote Melissa Stewart. “Besides being so compelling and delicious, the artwork in picture books can often teach kids more about a complex subject than the text,” Roz Schanzer added.<sup>5</sup> Responding to the same provocative article, the children’s book director for Global Fund for Children (which produces books about children around the world, photo essays designed for young readers and listeners) wrote to an electronic mailing list, “Our nonfiction picture books continue to be in demand.”<sup>6</sup> These authors, illustrators, and publishers are referring to books about a wide variety of subjects, but all agreed that the picture book format is both popular and effective.

There is no question that these colorful books are eye-catching. Even my college students, in training to be teachers, confessed that when they chose books to read for the class they looked at the covers and the pictures. In evaluating informational books they wrote comments such as “The pictures grabbed my attention” and “The book had real pictures which made it engaging and brought it to life.” There is no lack of books to choose from. According to Bowker—a company that charts publishing trends for libraries, publishers, and booksellers—of over 14,000 informational books published for young children in 2008, half were illustrated. Most of those 7,000 new and backlist titles do not rely on illustration heavily enough to be considered picture books, but a substantial number certainly were (R. Staats, Bowker, unpublished data). It can be hard to know how to choose among them.

In January 2011, the Association of Booksellers for Children and Bowker Pubtrack announced the results of a study that surprised and pleased many in the children’s book world. Among its conclusions: consumers still value books and reading over all other media in children’s lives; and, parents, teachers, relatives, librarians and booksellers are the most important influences in their reading choices.<sup>7</sup> If we have that responsibility,



we need to educate ourselves to be the most positive, knowledgeable influences we can be. This is where selection tools such as this book, review magazines and websites, award lists, and library and bookseller's suggestions come in. We need many pairs of eyes, many readers to assess the available books and find the best and the most appropriate for the young readers we serve.

The 250 books annotated in the chapters that follow represent one person's selection of excellent books published in the last five years that are intended to convey information to child readers through a combination of text and pictures. I've selected books included on a variety of award and best books lists as well as books that may have been overlooked.

My target reader set for this selection includes children from 3 to 10. At age 3, children understand that an image can represent a reality.<sup>8</sup> They can apply what they have learned from a picture to their everyday lives. Not long after that, they come to understand the difference between a made-up event and reality.<sup>9</sup> During elementary school, parents, teachers, and librarians reinforce this distinction by actively teaching the concepts of fiction and nonfiction. Most children come to understand this reasonably quickly, although, as with any other developmental turning point, the exact age varies. But plenty of children are encouraged to keep believing some stories long after others have consigned them to a fantasy world. (A teacher I know recalled one of her worst moments, when she mentioned the tooth fairy to her fourth graders and realized from their shocked expressions that several were still believers.) Elementary school children will ask, "Is that true?" "Did that really happen?" It is helpful to offer books to children that will help them distinguish between real and make-believe. And it's important that their "true" books be genuinely true.

In choosing books for this selection, I was looking for a range of books of demonstrated quality among the larger number that might be categorized as informational picture books. By nature, I am not a person who likes hard-and-fast definitions, and these categories are particularly slippery: What is a picture book? What is an informational book? What do librarians, teachers, publishers, and book reviewers mean when they use this phrase? Most people seem to use the terms comfortably, but when asked about particular books, it turns out that the edges of these concepts are fuzzy. What follows are answers I've come to in compiling this selection and some examples of books that others might categorize differently.

## WHAT IS AN INFORMATIONAL BOOK?

I recently spent a week at the beach with a friend's grandchildren. These two boys, ages 5 and 7, had great imaginations. They used fantasy characters and fantasy tropes in their own play, and happily listened to their grandmother's made-up stories. But they also enjoyed looking at and listening to picture books. They didn't care or even seem to notice whether the text was prose or poetry, whether information was embedded in a fictionalized story. They did care about the connection to their real world. They heard poetry from talking sea creatures, a nonfiction book about an undersea explorer,

and a nearly wordless picture book about friendship and cooperation starring seals. They liked them all. What appealed about all those books was the connection to their immediate, personal experience.

For the young child—as for adults—in a sense, everything is informational. We come to understand our world as much or more from the facts offered by the stories we read and the movies and shows we see, as we do from the more straightforward reportage. Unless they are told otherwise, children expect that what they read and hear will be true. Even adults need reminders and context clues to distinguish fact from fantasy.

An informational book is written to inform readers. The intent matters. The phrase *informational book* is often used interchangeably with *nonfiction*. The latter is a library term, describing everything not shelved in the Fiction and Picture Book sections in libraries using cataloging systems based on versions of the Dewey decimal system. Mythology and folklore are often given Dewey numbers and shelved in nonfiction collections, but they are not informational. They are usually reworkings of traditional stories; informational in intent only in the way they introduce children to a perhaps unfamiliar story. Poetry, too, has its own section and specific number among the nonfiction books. Poetry is a form, like short stories or comic books or graphic novels. Poetry can be used to convey facts, distill an experience, or describe something wholly imagined. It might or might not be informational.

Adults who deal with children have been grappling with this definition for generations, especially as they tried to identify the best of such books. The oldest award for children's informational books is the Orbis Pictus Award, given by the National Council of Teachers of English to books whose "central purpose [is] the sharing of information."<sup>10</sup> According to the criteria for the Sibert Informational Book Award (given by the Association for Library Service to Children, or ALSC, a division of the American Library Association), an informational book conveys "documentable factual information."<sup>11</sup> But documentation is often missing from a book for young readers. And can it have fictional elements? Does it make any difference if it is told as a narrative as exposition, as a series of facts, as a poem? It does make a difference for these awards, but is the difference meaningful for the reader or for the adult who is guiding the reader?

Exposition has been the customary way to deliver facts to adults, but there is a long tradition of conveying facts to children through story. Notable examples include Holling Clancy Hollings's Great Lakes–traveling *Paddle to the Sea* (1941), David Macaulay's *Cathedral* (1973), and subsequent titles such as *Mosque* (2003), all published by Houghton Mifflin. Many would argue—and some brain research supports the idea—that we all learn better through story because stories engage our emotions.<sup>12</sup> In her 1979 edition of *Children's Literature in the Elementary School*, Charlotte Huck offers several examples of "informational picture books" that are "exceptions to the rule that says information is distorted by a veil of fiction."<sup>13</sup> They present information about a subject but it comes through imagined narrators and situations.

The imaginary Ms. Frizzle has piloted a generation of schoolchildren through science and social science topics. I've included a recent Ms. Frizzle title, *The Magic*

*School Bus and the Climate Challenge* (by Joanna Cole, Scholastic Press, 2010). Reviews of this and others in the series in *The Horn Book* have appeared in the informational book section. Explaining that placement, Roger Sutton, the magazine's editor, told me: "In the case of the Magic School Bus books . . . the distinction between the fictional/fantasy elements and the information about science is clearly underlined, with the balance tipping in the direction of the latter" (pers. comm.). Elementary school readers can tell what is fantasy and what is fiction, not only through their own sense of what can actually be true but also through explanations in the back matter. And, in these titles, there is more information than story.

The sun is the imagined narrator in Molly Bang's *Living Sunlight* (Blue Sky Press, 2009), but both the intent and the effect are informational, explaining how the sun's light energy becomes the energy for life on earth. In *My Little Round House* (Groundwood Books, 2009), a description of Mongolian nomadic life, Jilu's first-person story begins in his mother's womb. (Helen Mixten adapts the story by Mongolian author/illustrator Bolormaa Baasansuren.) James Rumford's *Silent Music* (Roaring Brook Press, 2008) is a completely imagined story introducing the beautiful Arabic script in a realistic Baghdad setting. The manatee's experience in Jim Arnosky's *Slow Down for Manatees* (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2009) has been distilled from an actual event. The naturalist has organized it into a narrative whose purpose is not the story arc but the information he is conveying. There is no anthropomorphization. I've included all four of these books. In spite of imagined elements, they are informational picture books. The line I've tried to draw reflects both the author's intent, as far as I can discern it, and my judgment of how the reader will experience the book.

But what if parts of an apparently true story have been changed? Facts matter. Librarians have long consigned the imagined childhood events and made-up conversations of the *Childhood of Famous Americans* series to the category of historical fiction. It is fiction with a didactic intent. The back cover of current editions calls them "fictionalized biographies." Still, plenty of picture-book biographies are published today with imagined dialogue. "I think that invented dialogue simply cannot exist in nonfiction," writes Vicky Smith, children's editor for *Kirkus* magazine, when asked about the difference between that magazine's categories: picture book, informational picture book, and nonfiction (pers. comm.). For that magazine, as a rule, books with imagined dialogue are either described as picture books or fiction.

Informational picture books are an extension of the nonfiction continuum. But looking at library cataloging, even from the Library of Congress, we see again that there are no hard-and-fast rules. And even *Kirkus* has made exceptions. For the most part I have avoided using biographies and histories with extensive imagined dialogue. Where there are other invented elements, I have tried to point them out. A book that deals with exactly this issue, and which I included in this selection, is *Abe Lincoln Crosses a Creek* (Schwartz & Wade Books, 2008) where author Deborah Hopkinson and illustrator John Hendrix make a point of showing how the imagination of the creators shapes the story.

The phrase *narrative nonfiction* is often used to describe informational books that use techniques of fiction: stories told with a narrative arc, developed settings

and characters, rising and falling action, dialogue and interior monologue. These increasingly popular techniques are particularly appropriate for biographies and historical accounts. The dialogue and personal thoughts in these books will come out of the writer's research. A skilled writer such as Barbara Kerley can take quotations from primary sources and fit them into a new narrative, as she did in her biography of President Theodore Roosevelt's daughter, *What to Do about Alice?* (Scholastic Press, 2008). But narrative nonfiction is not the only possibility; informational books for young readers and listeners take other forms as well.

Traditionally, informational books for schoolchildren were written in a straightforward fashion, with topics introduced and highlighted by chapter headings and subheadings, and with clear topical or chronological organization. Many subject books intended for the school and library markets and some informational titles sold in bookstores are still presented that way. Deborah Heiligman's *Celebrate Diwali* (National Geographic, 2006) and other books in that excellent series on religious holidays are good examples.

Changes in book production have led to the rise of the photo essay, in which the pictures are the attraction and deliver much of the information while the text may be limited to a few lines and photo captions. There may be dual narratives, where a simple text for younger readers and listeners accompanies a more complex one. Often the subject is put into context by an afterword, intended for an older reader or adult. Nic Bishop's series for Scholastic, including *Spiders* (2007), *Frogs* (2008), and *Lizards* (2010), is an appealing example.

In her groundbreaking *Radical Change* (H. W. Wilson, 1999), Eliza Dresang referred to some books as "handheld hypertext,"<sup>14</sup> texts that don't require linear reading. These don't provide a narrative. Instead, the child reader constructs the narrative using text and illustration together as well as clues provided by the design. Scholastic's Magic School Bus series is one example. Simon & Schuster's Insiders series goes even further toward the reference book end of the continuum. A local librarian told me that an Insiders volume was her son's favorite bedtime story long before he could read; well loved to the point that the family finally limited him to one double-page spread per evening. As soon as he could sound out words, he was reading these complex books on his own, puzzling out the informational bits whose illustrations had attracted his attention. MetaMetrics' Lexile Framework for Reading, an often-cited measurement of text difficulty, codes some of these books IG, "illustrated guides," a category that covers the range from encyclopedias to books presented topically in single or double-page chunks. In these books "text pieces could be moved around without affecting the overall linear flow of the book."<sup>15</sup>

Finally there are interesting new hybrids. The text of Jason Chin's *Redwoods* (Roaring Brook Press, 2009) reads like an extensive encyclopedia entry. The illustrations show the boy's fantasy journey into the forest and up to the top of a tree, demonstrating what an able nonfiction reader might be doing with material that seems, on its surface, bland.

Everyone likes to learn new things. When children or adults say they prefer fiction, they may well be thinking more about style than about content. Some readers like to

amass facts and skip around in their reading; others love a good story but retain all of its background; still others want information organized clearly so they can see what's important. Some prefer photographs, something that looks like the real thing; others like the additional emotional and informational content that a good artist can convey. These differences are more a matter of taste than a matter of definition.

In any preschool or day-care center, informational books are an important part of the library. Such books may have talking toothbrushes and anthropomorphized animals. Invented dialogue and imagined incidents have always been part and parcel of the presentation of information to the very young. At what point should teachers and librarians insist on total accuracy and realism in the books they recommend? And at what point does a subject become too complex to be explained correctly to a child? These are questions without easy answers. The common sense response is "It depends." Rather than eliminate books with fictional elements and possibly misleading simplification, I have included some whose purpose is obviously informational but have pointed out such embellishments in my annotation.

## WHAT IS A PICTURE BOOK?

The second part of the phrase *informational picture book* is an equally blurry category. Most adults remember informational books from their childhood as a sea of gray type, dull in presentation even if the subject was interesting. A college junior in my children's literature class wrote in her reading response journal, "If informational books could be like picture books, it would be great." The good news is that today, they are. Changing expectations and tastes, as well as advances in printing and publishing that have reduced the cost and complexity of adding color illustrations, have led to a situation where more often than not, an informational book, even one for readers in grades six through ten, is illustrated on nearly every page. Books in Houghton Mifflin's Scientists in the Field series, such as Pamela Turner's *The Frog Scientist* (2009) or Sy Montgomery's *Tarantula Scientist* (2007), have considerable appeal even for reluctant readers because of the eye-catching photographs that add to the information in the text. National Geographic's award-winning Face to Face series features photographs and personal encounters described by naturalists who have studied all sorts of appealing creatures: butterflies, manatees, penguins, elephants, lions, and many more. A patient listener with a special interest will certainly enjoy seeing these, but they are beyond the usual understanding of picture book.

In a well-edited picture book the illustrations have "collective unity," a phrase ALSC uses in its definitions for its well-known Caldecott Award. A picture book "essentially provides the child with a visual experience." It has a "story-line, theme, or concept developed through the series of pictures of which the book is comprised."<sup>16</sup> The adult trying to categorize books has to look beyond thematic unity to see if these pictures actually extend or simply support the text. Do they tell a story—at least the story of the text, or (very likely) something more? Or do they just illuminate incidents? Sometimes the story may seem lacking, but the illustrations are striking enough to

draw readers into the book and keep them there. That seems to be the case with the *Insiders* books, whose computer graphic imagery gives a striking 3-D effect. These images are intriguing enough to some early readers that they are willing to expend extra effort to decode the text. The text in these books comes in digestible bites while the images add to and extend the reader's understanding.

A picture book, one publicist told me only half in jest, is a book for a picture book audience. Others define it as one that can be read in one sitting. They are imagining the "traditional picture book experience," an adult with a child on the lap or several nestled close by, possibly at bedtime. Or they picture an adult reading to a group, skillfully showing the illustrations while simultaneously speaking the text. Books for reading aloud can have substantially more difficult text, laid out on the page in more complex ways, than books designed for young readers to read themselves. Books for reading to a group need illustrations that show well across a room. In the annotations that follow, I have sometimes pointed out books that I thought would make especially good read-alouds.

Some adults complain that today's children can't or won't sit still to listen for an extended period. But today's children aren't limited to books that can be read in one sitting or to stories that march sequentially to a clearly defined ending. They are comfortable dealing with a variety of stimuli and constructing their own understandings. Those of us who read to very small children try to teach them to begin at the beginning and progress through to the end. But their lives don't feel like that, and their own natural inclinations often lead them to skip some pages, linger on others, go back and forth, and make their own narrative. In a world where, increasingly, other experiences reinforce their ability to attend to a variety of stimuli at the same time, the single linear path of an old-fashioned picture book is just one of many possibilities. And in truth, information is like that. It comes in bits and pieces that we need to put together ourselves. With few exceptions, scientific knowledge is accumulated by a variety of researchers working at different times and places and not even always in the same field. Historians look at masses of different documents to pull together a coherent picture of an event. It is appropriate to include informational books for young people that model something of that experience.

In limiting this selection to books for children from ages 3 to 10, I have excluded books meant for the earliest use: concept books, counting books, and early alphabet books of the sort simply designed to teach letters. At the other end of the scale I have excluded titles whose text could not be understood by an able 9- or 10-year-old. Children will read or listen to anything that truly interests them; they should not be limited by age and grade-level distinctions. But with so many good books to choose from, there needed to be some limits.

To sum up my working definition, an informational picture book is a book both intended and experienced as one that conveys information through a marriage of text and pictures. This information is factual and up to date. It can be documented, and it has been presented appropriately for child readers or listeners ages 3 to 10. This sounds straightforward but it's a definition with blurry edges, not as easy to apply as it sounds. Here are just a few more examples, books using extensive fictional elements or traditional literary forms for informational purposes:

Mark Foster's *Whale Port* (Houghton Mifflin, 2007) imagines a New England coastal settlement, following its growth and change through the years to describe the history of whaling ports. At first, illustrations stretch across a double-page spread, with a paragraph of text on or under the illustration, a typical picture book composition. But then there are pages with more extensive text and smaller, carefully labeled illustrations. Tiny sketches add information that does not appear in the text (varieties of harpoons; the specialized tasks of crew members on a whaling ship; how whalebone was used in a lady's corset). In spite of the extensive, expository text, the relatively difficult vocabulary, and the composite, imagined place and families, this title—reminiscent of David Macauley's work—belongs on this list. The intent is to inform; the experience is informational; the reading level is age appropriate; the pictures extend the text.

Joyce Sidman's *Ubiquitous* (Houghton Mifflin, 2010) is a collection of poetry celebrating life forms that have long flourished on our planet. Each poem is accompanied by a paragraph of factual information, and the whole is meticulously sourced. Similarly, Pat Mora's *Yum! ¡Mmmm! ¡Qué rico!* (Lee & Low Books, 2007) describes food plants native to North and South America in haiku. Again, her information is sourced. In both cases, though the form is literary, the content is factual and the illustrations, on double-page spreads, extend the text.

Jacqueline Jules's *Unite or Die* (Charlesbridge, 2009) uses the framework of a school play to present the Constitutional Convention of 1786–87. A simple narration and speech balloons are brought to life by the cartoons depicting various parts of the play. Text and pictures work together in the synergistic way that characterizes a picture book. This is not a subject for preschool children, but the Constitutional Convention does turn up in elementary curricula, and some children are interested in U.S. history long before they have been exposed to it in school. In relatively few lines, the author gets the important issues across and details of the staging shown in the illustrations help make the concepts clear.

In Carole Boston Weatherford's *Moses: When Harriet Tubman Led Her People to Freedom* (Hyperion Books for Children, 2006), God speaks and Harriet replies. This imagined or recollected dialogue is set off by the use of different fonts and is based on Tubman's own accounts.<sup>17</sup> Almost every professional reviewer and the catalogers at the Library of Congress define this as an informational book. Librarians, reviewers, and bookstore managers categorize books like these on a case-by-case basis, and there is no unanimity. But they all seemed to belong in this selection.

## NOTES

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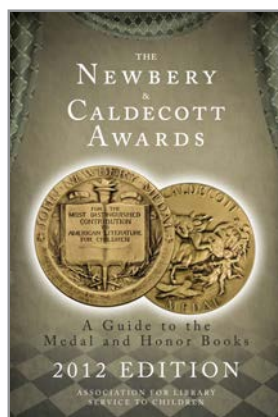
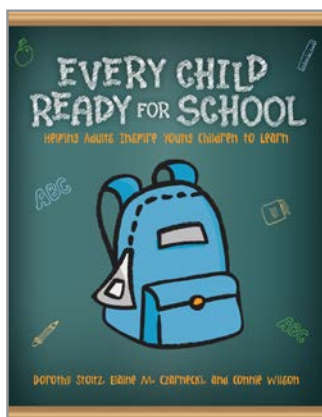
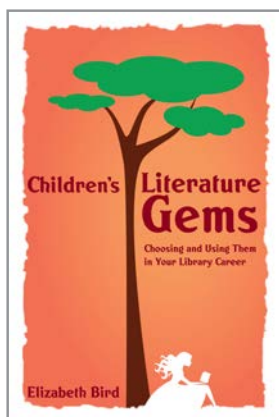
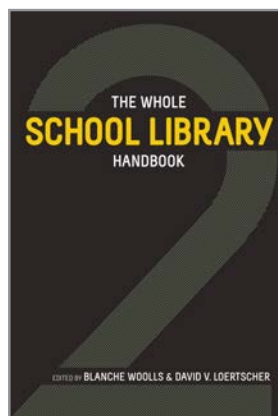
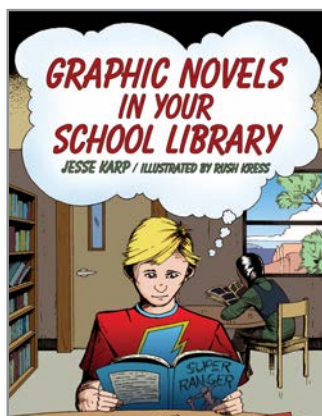
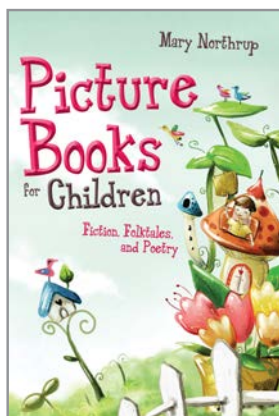
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