



Disguises and Surprises

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~~Editors Choice:~~

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Media type:

Book

BfK Rating:

5

The soil is crawling with earthworms. There could easily be a million in an area the size of your school games pitch.

Although they feel rubbery, worms are actually covered with hundreds of tiny bristles. The bristles help them to grip as they wriggle along their tunnels.

These are two of the information segments from the spread on worms in **Wings, Stings and Wiggly Things**, one of the two launch titles in a new and aptly named ('Bright Sparks') non-fiction series. Among the other minibeasts discussed are butterflies, bees, snails and ants. This title's companion volume, **Disguises and Surprises**, is an introduction to camouflage in the animal world (from stick insects to polar bears). Both are topics with strong appeal to seven- to nine-year-olds and topics that will come up in the classroom. Martin Jenkins, a biologist and conservationist, is the author of one title and the consultant on the other.

Aimed at children capable of reading the texts for themselves (although they also read aloud well), the approach taken is cognisant of the need to provide clear signposts for young readers not yet familiar with the conventions of reading non-fiction. Thus the spread on worms contains simple information that is not only clearly explained but related back, where possible, to readers' first hand experience - 'the world's longest earthworm,' we are told, is 'not much thicker than your little finger - but at 7 metres long, it would outstretch three skipping ropes!'

There is some debate currently on the relative merits of narrative non-fiction versus picture-led non-fiction with information soundbites (the DK model). But narrative in non-fiction can be provided using a variety of devices including visual clues - here numbering guides the reader on the main part of the spread while additional information is provided by a boxed picture strip, again clearly numbered. The differing functions of these components are further indicated by the larger and heavier typeface on the main spread which contains basic information compared with that used for the picture strip which goes into interesting detail.

The organisation of material on the worms spread discussed above is applied throughout both these titles, providing a clear overall structure and permitting young readers to read, reread or dip with confidence. A contents list, pagination and an index provide opportunities for retrieval skills to be tried out.

Excitement, enjoyment and friendliness must be associated with the need for knowledge and information if children are to become enthusiastic readers of non-fiction. These titles invite young readers in by addressing them directly ('You wouldn't want to play hide-and-seek with this gecko.' etc.). New words are of course introduced (radula, antennae, chrysalis, etc.) but the informal and conversational syntactic structures used result in texts which are both informative and accessible.

Both these books are beautifully designed with toning mottled backgrounds to the artworks on which type in an attractive, handlettering face is placed. Informality and fun are reinforced with the inclusion of two gatefold spreads and a quiz that runs throughout the books, e.g. 'Worms can tie themselves in knots - true or false?' (The answer, amazingly, is true.)

Sympathetically organised, well pitched information titles such as these can play a key role in helping children to learn how to access and integrate information from books. When they are as sparky as these new 'Bright Sparks' are, children will also enjoy reading non-fiction.

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