



Early Years Reading: First encounters with non-fiction

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Margaret Mallett explores informational literacy.

first encounters with non-fiction

The best non-fiction texts for young children are those which connect with their interests and preoccupations and with their desire to find out. **Margaret Mallett**, visiting tutor in Primary English at Goldsmiths' College London, explores the beginnings of informational literacy and suggests exciting titles to help children talk, think and learn.

Six-year-olds have returned from a nature walk to look for spiders. With the teacher's help they are annotating their drawings, using books, encyclopaedias and CD-ROMs. They ask questions and make observations which link their first-hand experience with what they are finding in the classroom resources. They are completely engrossed. I begin with this glimpse into an early years classroom because it helps us keep in mind something of huge importance: non-fiction works best when embedded in activities that give it point and purpose. When teachers use non-fiction texts in school they have to consider their quality, the children's interests and purposes and their own skilled role in bringing learners and texts together.

First encounters

But children come across informational print long before they start school; in the home they see letters, names on food packets and print on the screen while outside the world is full of notices, posters and shop signs. Books for the very young, available from museum shops, supermarkets, libraries and bookshops, are just as likely to be alphabet, concept or 'experience' books as story books. Produced in many shapes and sizes, early non-fiction texts are often playfully interactive, sometimes with amusing pop-ups that blur the boundaries between book and toy. Nursery teams use them to interest children in letters and numbers and to help them classify and talk about everyday objects and activities. Very typical are the Spot books which reflect young children's own exuberance. When I offered to contribute a book to a nursery school where I observe and research the teacher replied: '**Spot's Touch and Feel Day** feeds beautifully into our work on the five senses.' (Mallett, 2003). These early books are shared and read as a way of helping children order their experience. At the same time children begin to create their own simple texts. They learn to write their names, annotate their drawings, make lists and write simple, chronologically ordered retellings of events 'recounts'. And so there is a strong connection between developing literacy and children's purposes.

Role play

Practitioners have long recognized that one way to make this connection is through role play, and there is welcome reinforcement of this link between role play and developing literacy in **Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage** (3-6 year olds). Role play provides a perfect setting for using labels, notices and charts in children's 'baby clinics', 'cafés' and 'fire stations'. Boys, especially, like making signs and notices for robust outdoor play, for 'petrol stations' or 'plant nurseries'. Vigorous texts, like the 'Amazing Machines' series, give them ideas for extending their

play. Children role playing in a 'garage' setting might draw from the environmental print in **Tough Trucks**, showing vehicle number plates and transport café signs. 'Fragile' is written on one of the boxes and an arrow shows which way up the box should be placed.

'Hands on' activities and 'how to' texts

Young children are active and practical so it is not surprising that we direct quite a lot of their first reading and writing to the 'instruction' or 'procedural' genre to books describing simple science experiments or recipes, giving step by step instructions. **Honey Biscuits** shows Ben talking to his grandmother about where all the ingredients to make them come from. **Camping Trip** gives instructions about putting up a tent, but set in a story about a mother and her little daughters; so that in literacy strategy terms it is a 'recount'.

Non-fiction across the curriculum

Information stories

As children move through the early school years many lessons and activities provide settings in which non-fiction texts can help them think and learn. Some of the liveliest texts are 'information stories' which might follow the life cycle of an animal or plant and thereby provide a bridge into science studies. *Is that a Butterfly?* illustrates each stage of its life and

stunning paper engineering shows a butterfly bursting from its chrysalis. Information storybooks can often help link science with children's activities at home. Sarah Garland's **Eddie's Garden and How to Make Things Grow** follows a young child through the stages of sowing seed and then nurturing the developing plants until it is time to harvest them and in doing so contributes to an understanding of germination. **Dinosaur in Danger** about the efforts of one young deinonychus to survive uses dramatic writing and vivid illustrations to take children into a fearsome prehistoric world of erupting volcanoes and dangerous predators. Another book which takes children beyond their own experience is **On the Moon** which integrates drawings and photographs to show a mountainous, barren landscape with grey rocks and deep craters lots to talk about here.

In geography, early books are often 'Day in the Life of' accounts. **Welcome Dede!** takes us through an African naming ceremony using photographs and writing that link with themes of environment, ritual and sharing. Then there are chronologically ordered product books like **Woolly Jumper: The Story of Wool**. Using this book with a group of six-year-olds, I found that the refrain 'This is the sheep, That stood in the field, And ate the grass' helped them keep in mind the links between animal and product.

Walker Books' 'Read and Wonder' series was a breakthrough in children's non-fiction because personal responses as well as facts were acknowledged. So **Spider Watching** provides detailed information and an excellent, labelled cross section but also vividly shows us that some people fear spiders. Feelings are also important in Franklin Watts' 'Wonderwise' series. Manning and Granström communicate the sheer exhilaration of running across the beach with **dbg**, peering into rock pools and exploring sand dunes in **High Tide, Low Tide**.

Non-chronological texts

Non-chronologically organized information books or 'reports' are what most people would recognize as typical children's information texts. Some are disappointingly bland and sometimes scraps of information are attached to a mish mash of pictures. We need inspiring illustrations and an energetic, coherent text to help a young reader to get a foothold in new knowledge. **Creature Hair** appeals because it is full of visual surprises and it helps children begin to classify animals. Kingfisher's 'Up the Garden Path' series invites in young readers by organizing the books round questions; **Are you a Snail?** both entertains and informs. **Animals: A First Art Book** offers a superb, lightly annotated selection of paintings, including Albert Durer's magnificent 'Stag Beetle'. The responsibilities and joys of pet ownership are brilliantly communicated through entertaining poems in **Pets, Pets, Pets!**

The best authors of information books give just the right amount of detail in words and pictures. **Voices of the Rainforest** gives an insight into what it might be like to live in this environment using an involving text and beautifully, clear uncluttered maps and diagrams.

Pushing at the boundaries

Among the variety of styles, approaches and formats that teachers look for in a classroom collection they hope to include some information books which push at the boundaries of our expectations. **Where Willy Went?** is quite startlingly explicit about human fertilization ? but it answers the questions children are likely ask. **Egg Drop** is another most original book about an egg that wanted to fly but learnt that for eggs only gravity works. It nudges children towards the concept of aerodynamics. By age seven children who are enthusiastic about their art lessons will enjoy **The Shape Game** by Anthony Browne. This story, about a family visit to the Tate gallery, moves imperceptibly from Dad?s awful jokes and some entertaining and teasing illustrations to a child?s first profound look at a work of art. Courageous and innovative authors such as these are to be celebrated at Nicola Davies? TES sponsored conference ?Adventures in the Real World? which will be part of the Swansea festival on 7 and 8 October 2005 (Dylan.ThomasLiterature@swansea.gov.uk [3]).

Non book print and electronic texts

Some of the most inviting non-narrative print and illustration comes in the form of non-book print ? **Butterflies and Moths** and **Dinosaurs** (Macdonald Books and Posters) are large and colourful enough to focus group talk and provide an interesting background to a display. Electronic texts develop new and dynamic forms of literacy showing processes like, for example, buds opening or machinery working. **Where in the World is Barnaby Bear?** , in CD-ROM format now, uses the device of an appealing character to keep up children?s interest. Sound and video-film are particularly stimulating in geography work as they reveal landscapes and lifestyles in an immediate way.

What about study skills?

Early fact books nearly always have good retrieval devices these days to help children get to the information they need. So do the early reference books ? dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopaedias and atlases ? which pour from well regarded publishing houses like Dorling Kindersley, Heinemann, Kingfisher, Usborne and Oxford University Press. The best dictionaries and thesauruses encourage interest in words and ideas ? **The Usborne First Dictionary** does this with language games and puzzles in addition to its 2,500 headwords and 700 Internet links. So a playful approach works well: I have seen very young children chuckling over the illustrations and humorous language in **Oxford First Thesaurus** .

For children in Year 1, term 2 the objectives in **The National Literacy Strategy Framework** include ?understanding the function of contents pages and indexes?. But having their teacher demonstrate how to look up items in an index or glossary as a mere exercise, without any supporting context, is unlikely to inspire young children. As teachers know, these strategies are best taught once children feel some enthusiasm for texts and see the point of becoming ?young researchers? able to find what they want to know quickly. And it makes sense to choose titles (eg. Pelican Big Books) that not only help demonstrate study skills (in the ?shared reading? part of the literacy hour) but can also be used for learning in other lessons. **The History of Teddy Bears** and **Clothes Babies Used to Wear** match with history themes and the appealing pictures help encourage talk about the illustrations that help identify a book with a non-fiction genre. All this can be reinforced in the ?guided reading? groups. Teachers can either use copies of a good trade book or select a reading scheme ?six pack?; these titles have different levels of difficulty and should feed into lesson topics as well as developing vocabulary and phonic awareness. **Night-time Animals** and **Things that Sting** (Oxford Reading Tree?s ?Firefly? series) have the kind of illustrations that spark children?s interest.

Another series used for ?guided reading? groups is The National Geographic?s ?Windows on Literacy?. **Water, Land and Air** introduces children to the elements of the earth and the fine digital images suggest how we represent these things on maps. There is no doubt that quality illustrations in both print and electronic texts engage children?s attention

and help them learn. We must take care, though, never to underestimate the importance of the words that explain and extend the meaning of the images.

?Booktalk? and book making

And it is talk that has the power to illuminate the information to be found in both pictures and writing. In **Tell Me** Aidan Chambers had fiction in mind when he wrote of the value of ?booktalk? ? those conversations which teachers and children have about enthusiasms and puzzles. But non-fiction texts also call for talk about ideas and possibilities. One of the most energising settings for such talk, and one which helps children see how non-fiction works, is making a book. This is what the children learning about spiders did. With quite a lot of teacher support, they chose a global structure organized round their questions, created text and added illustrations, a glossary and an index. I remember the question of one child: ?Is it wrong to kill a spider?? This question arose from much investigation and talk about the lives of spiders, how they make different kinds of web and how they nurture their young. This young learner had gone beyond ?report? and ?the facts? towards ethics and argument. If we want children to have their minds and hearts expanded by information and ideas their involvement with texts must be truly reflective.

National Literacy Strategy Non-fiction text types

Recount Events related in a time sequence: life cycles, journeys and ?day in the life of? accounts.

Report Non-narrative text; e.g. typical information books on ?Spiders?, ?Rivers? or ?Levers?.

Explanation Explains structures (e.g. of human body) or processes (e.g. machine working).

Discussion Presents some different viewpoints on a topic to inspire talk (topics like mobile phones, hunting whales or keeping pets).

Persuasion Similar to ?discussion text? but gives one side of the argument e.g. adverts.

Instruction Sets out a series of procedures, for example for a recipe or science experiment.

We could add ?literary kinds of non-fiction? which would include autobiography, biography and some kinds of travel writing.

References

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Mallett, Margaret (2003) **Early Years Non-fiction: a Guide to Helping Young Researchers Use and Enjoy Information Texts** , London: RoutledgeFalmer.

QCA (2000) **Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage** , London: Department for Education and Employment.

Children?s texts mentioned

Spot?s Touch and Feel Day , Eric Hill, G P Putnam?s Sons, 10pp, 0 399 23209 5, £7.00 hbk

Tough Trucks , Tony Mitton and Ant Parker, Kingfisher ?Amazing Machines?, 22pp, 0 7534 0834 1, £3.99 pbk

Honey Biscuits , Meredith Hooper, ill. Alison Bartlett, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 1 84507 045 3, £5.99 pbk

Camping Trip , Deborah Chancellor, photographs by Chris Fairclough, Franklin Watts ?Reading Corner?, 24pp, 0

7496 5374 4, £3.99 pbk

Is that a Butterfly? Lift-the-flap life cycle story, Claire Llewellyn and Ant Parker, paper engineering by Nick Denchfield, Macmillan, 24pp, 0 333 96226 5, £4.99 pbk

Eddie's Garden and How to Make Things Grow , Sarah Garland, Frances Lincoln, 40pp, 1 84507 015 1, £10.99 hbk

Dinosaur in Danger , Paul Geraghty, Red Fox, 32pp, 0 09 943865 8, £5.99 pbk

On the Moon , Anna Milbourne, ill. Benji Davies, Usborne, 24pp, 0 7460 5211 1, £6.99 hbk

Welcome Dede! An African Naming Ceremony , Ifeoma Onyefulu, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 0 7112 2049 2, £5.99 pbk

Woolly Jumper: The Story of Wool , Meredith Hooper, ill. Katharine McEwen, Walker, 32pp, 0 7445 8300 4, £4.99 pbk

Spider Watching , Vivian French, ill. Alison Wisenfeld, Walker 'Read and Wonder?', 32pp, 0 7445 4735 0, o/p

High Tide, Low Tide , Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Franklin Watts 'Wonderwise Readers?', 32pp, 0 7496 4784 1, £3.99 pbk

Creature Hair , Nicola Whittaker, Franklin Watts, 32pp, 0 7496 4909 7, o/p

Are you a Snail? Judy Allen, ill. Tudor Humphries, Kingfisher 'Up the Garden Path?', 32pp, 0 7534 0668 3, £3.99 pbk

Animals: A First Art Book , Lucy Micklethwait, Frances Lincoln, 24pp, 1 84507 027 5, £9.99 hbk

Pets, Pets, Pets! Kathy Henderson, ill. Chris Fisher, Frances Lincoln, 32pp, 1 84507 021 6, £10.99 hbk

Voices of the Rainforest , Mick Manning and Brita Granström, Franklin Watts, 32pp, 0 7496 5117 2, £10.99 hbk

Where Willy Went? Nicholas Allan, Hutchinson, 32pp, 0 09 189295 3, £9.99 hbk

Egg Drop , Mini Grey, Red Fox, 24pp, 0 09 943203 X, £5.99 pbk

The Shape Game , Anthony Browne, Corgi, 32pp, 0 552 54696 8, £5.99 pbk

Butterflies and Moths , C and H Pelant, 1 903612 53 5, **Dinosaurs** , Cecelia Fitzsimons, 1 903612 06 3, Macdonald Books and Posters, £2.99 each chart

Where in the World is Barnaby Bear? BBC with Sherston and the Geographical Association, Code MA 547634, £49.99 CD-ROM (for 5-7 year olds)

The Usborne First Dictionary , Rachel Wardley and Jane Bingham, ill. Teri Gower, Usborne, 144pp, 0 7460 4879 3, £9.99 hbk

Oxford First Thesaurus , Alan Delahunty, ill. Steve Cox, Oxford, 128pp, 0 19 910728 9, £6.99 pbk

The History of Teddy Bears , Sallie Purkis, 48pp, 0 582 33736 4, **Clothes Babies Used to Wear** , Anne Witherington and Bobbie Neate, 24pp, 0 582 33735 6, Pelican Big Books, Longman, £3.50 each pbk

Night-time Animals (Stage 9), Nash Kramer, 16pp, 0 19 919751 2, £3.00 pbk, **Things that Sting** (Stage 7), Brian Birchall, 0 19 919784 9, £3.75 pbk, Oxford Reading Tree 'Fireflies?'

Water, Land and Air , Pat Malone, Rigby for National Geographic 'Windows on Literacy?', 12pp, 0 433 01073 8,

£9.00 pbk (pack of 3)

How can teachers support children's developing ICT literacy? **Olivia O'Sullivan** provides helpful principles and many exciting suggestions for using electronic texts in the final article in this 'Early Years Reading' series in the next issue of **BfK**.

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