“History with Feelings”: Nonfiction Titles for Teens

While I enjoy YA fiction as much as anyone, I have found myself drifting more to nonfiction more recently, for several reasons. For one, as teachers we’re all rightfully concerned about how the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) will be implemented across all adopting states by 2014, and we know that an increased emphasis on nonfiction and informational texts is one of the hallmarks of these new standards. By looking for engaging and high-quality nonfiction texts, English language arts teachers can help students read a range of different texts at varying complexity levels; observe how research is conducted, leading to inspired and thrilling writing; and even pair nonfiction with fiction. With the emphasis in CCSS on informational texts, there may be even greater opportunities for interdisciplinary links with our colleagues, and many of the titles in this column present natural connections especially to social studies and science. A second reason for looking more closely at YA nonfiction is that, quite simply, there are a great number of outstanding titles that can reach students across curricular levels.

By reading and talking about these titles with our students, we can hopefully avoid falling into the “fictioncentric” reading trap that Ed Sullivan warned us about. Fiction certainly has its rightful place in our curricula and on our shelves, but we shouldn’t overlook nonfiction along the way. When done well, nonfiction can leave us with the same lasting impressions and sense of wonder we receive when reading the most imagina-tive fantasy. Except in these cases, the fantastic actually happened, and the heroes of the stories have walked among us.

When selecting quality nonfiction for the classroom and beyond, teachers should look for those “extra” features apart from the text itself. Notable elements in the best nonfiction can include photographs, reproduced newspaper and magazine articles from the time period, interviews, glossaries, timelines, and extensive notes and bibliographies, so that readers can pursue the topics further. (For more ideas on teaching nonfiction, see also the March 2012 English Journal, themed “Keeping It Real: Teaching Nonfiction.”)

The books that follow are among the best I’ve seen in recent years, although this column cannot accommodate all that the field has to offer. You will notice that a number of YA authors specialize in nonfiction, so if you enjoy one title, you should look to see what else that particular author may have written. The range of their research and writing interests will astound you.

Nonfiction: Authors of Note

One excellent author of nonfiction is Steve Sheinkin, who won wide acclaim for The Notorious Benedict Arnold: A True Story of Adventure, Heroism and Treachery (Flash Point, 2010). In that work, Sheinkin presents Arnold not as a brief historical footnote, but as a patriotic American military hero whose recklessness and antiauthoritarian streak led him to a traitorous and tragic end. In Sheinkin’s latest, Bomb: The Race to Build—and Steal—the World’s Most Dangerous Weapon (Flash Point, 2012), readers will experience the building of the first atomic weapon as a breathless spy thriller. From clandestine meetings on street corners to secretive labs in the remote desert, Sheinkin ensures that even though readers may know the outcome of these historical events, the narrative will still leave them on the edge of their seats with anticipation.

In How They Croaked: The Awful Ends of the Awfully Famous
Off the Shelves

Sally M. Walker has a number of outstanding nonfiction titles to her name, but two of her latest works deserve particular mention. *Blizzard of Glass: The Halifax Explosion of 1917* (Holt, 2011) relates the events surrounding December 6, 1917, when two ships (one of which was loaded with munitions) collided in Halifax Harbour. The resulting explosion killed close to 2,000 people and completely leveled the nearby towns of Halifax and Dartmouth. To make matters even worse, a snowstorm hit the area on the following day, seriously hindering relief efforts. The way Walker introduces townspeople in the early chapters heightens the tension of the book, as readers soon learn who lives and who perishes. This is a devastating account of the human toll of the catastrophe and the way a community reacted to disaster. Walker’s latest work, *Their Skeletons Speak: Kennewick Man and the Paleoamerican World* (Carolrhoda, 2012), is an excellent choice for younger readers interested in archaeology. The 1996 discovery of a skeleton more than 9,000 years old offers readers a look at the meticulous scientific process of uncovering the secrets the bones had to tell and what light they could shed on the lives of humans in that era.

Sally M. Walker has a number of outstanding nonfiction titles to her name, but two of her latest works deserve particular mention. *Flesh and Blood So Cheap: The Triangle Fire and Its Legacy* (Knopf, 2011) details the horrendous fire at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory in New York City in 1911, which killed 146 people, mostly women. It would have been relatively easy for author Albert Marrin to simply chronicle the events of the fire itself, but the true strength of this book lies in the way Marrin reaches back to explain some of the underlying causes and contexts of the fire. The book explains clearly how the disaster was, in essence, an outcome of the early 20th-century immigration movement in this country, as well as the conditions under which garment workers toiled during that era. Marrin’s latest title, *Black Gold: The Story of Oil in Our Lives* (Random, 2012), outlines the vital role that crude oil plays in our everyday existence, to the point that a world without oil is, for better or worse, unimaginable. Marrin argues, to great effect, that all wars since World War I have been fought for control of oil, in one way or another. The book is a strong introduction to the social, political, and historical context of our most important, and unsustainable, fossil fuel.

Candace Fleming, another decorated writer of nonfiction for young readers, presents the woman behind multiple myths in *Amelia Lost: The Life and Disappearance of Amelia Earhart* (Schwartz & Wade, 2011). Fleming is always able to bring her subjects fully to life, and her treatment of Earhart is no exception. Readers will learn more about the major events in the pilot’s too-short life and
understand the influences that drove her to chase the skies—and fame. Fleming explores Earhart’s family background, her own keen sense of how to manage and cultivate her celebrity, and the various legends that erroneously emerged from her adventures. The pacing of the book is tremendous, interspersed with suspenseful moments from the final flight, allowing readers to see how many crucial clues may have been missed in the precious hours after Earhart’s plane went down in the Pacific.

Karen Blumenthal, a career journalist and nonfiction author for young people, chronicles the rise and fall of our nation’s Eighteenth Amendment in her most recent work, Bootleg: Murder, Moonshine, and the Lawless Years of Prohibition (Roaring Brook, 2011). Blumenthal provides a fascinating look at the decades-long temperance movement, leading up to the ratification of the amendment in 1920 and the illegal activity it spawned; all of this was despite the best intentions that the act would help curb criminal behavior, keep families intact, and strengthen the nation. Readers familiar with famous Prohibition figures such as Al Capone will marvel at their roots and how they were part of a much grander narrative. Blumenthal also includes a ample discussion of how Prohibition still affects the United States to this day.

Tanya Lee Stone has been mentioned in this column previously for her poetry (Letcher), but she is also an accomplished nonfiction writer. Her Almost Astronauts: 13 Women Who Dared to Dream (Candlewick, 2009) describes the grueling efforts of 13 women to gain admission to NASA’s training program for astronauts in the early 1960s. These women, all strong pilots with exemplary test scores, struggled against not only the rigors of NASA training but also the deeply ingrained sexism within the institution and US media and society. The book offers a fascinating look into the science and technology of the early space program, as well as a powerful demonstration of the struggle for women’s rights in an especially male-dominated field. A more recent work of Stone’s provides a fascinating look at a cultural icon. The Good, the Bad, and the Barbie: A Doll’s History and Her Impact on Us (Viking, 2010) is an exceptional examination of how the ubiquitous doll has reflected US fashion and cultural sensibilities. For lovers and haters of the doll, and all points in between, Stone has the bases covered. This book looks at Barbie’s introduction in 1959 and her growth, or lack thereof, throughout the years, as she reflected changes in the workplace and society while igniting strong debate over young girls’ concepts of body image. This is an excellent book not just for those familiar with the doll (and really, who isn’t?) but anyone interested in how toys can shape the childhood experience.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s provides the subject matter for Charlayne Hunter-Gault’s To the Mountaintop: My Journey through the Civil Rights Movement (Roaring Brook, 2012). Hunter-Gault, one of the first African Americans to attend the University of Georgia, and later the first African American woman writer at the New Yorker, traces her personal involvement with the civil rights movement, mainly from 1959 through 1965, bookended by her reflections on the election of President Barack Obama. Reproduced articles from the New York Times, as well as archival photographs, help provide additional context for Hunter-Gault’s history. Cynthia Levinson focuses on a much more specific episode of the movement, to powerful effect, in We’ve Got a Job: The 1963 Birmingham Children’s March (Peachtree, 2012). Between May 2 and May 11, 1963, nearly 2,500 young African Americans, from
elementary through high school age, boycotted their schools and were arrested and jailed in Birmingham, Alabama. Levinson builds her dramatic history around the accounts of four young arrestees, which effectively focuses the audience for the content that follows. Another African American pioneer, and one rarely discussed, is Lewis Michaux, whose story is told in No Crystal Stair (Carolrhoda, 2012). Michaux was a bookseller who built the National Memorial Bookstore in Harlem from a meager beginning of $100 and five books. That store grew to become the intellectual center of Harlem, and Michaux’s relationships with prominent leaders of the civil rights movement, particularly Malcolm X, would garner him acclaim and criticism. Vaunda Michaux Nelson combines archival research, interviews, and evocative illustrations by R. Gregory Christie, along with some fictionalized accounts of Michaux’s career.

Two nonfiction entries stand out as outstanding examples of personal essays, at times hilarious and heartbreaking. Megan Kelley Hall and Carrie Jones, accomplished authors themselves, have assembled some of the biggest names in adolescent literature for their edited collection Dear Bully: Seventy Authors Tell Their Stories (Harper, 2011). In this impressive collection, which belongs in every classroom and home, the authors share their stories of bullying and their roles as victims, perpetrators, and silent witnesses. These entries will provide readers with insight, inspiration, and the knowledge that those who suffer bullying are never truly alone. Another stirring collection that should be on every teacher’s shelf is The Letter Q: Queer Writers’ Notes to Their Younger Selves (Levine, 2012), edited by Sarah Moon and James Lecesne. This volume will remind some readers of Dan Savage and Terry Miller’s collection, It Gets Better: Coming Out, Overcoming Bullying, and Creating a Life Worth Living (Dutton, 2011), with one important difference: rather than writing essays directed at LGBTQ youth in general, the contributing authors in The Letter Q have written letters to their younger selves, relating what they would have liked to have known about their lives then, or their lives to be. Writers of all types are represented within, and the genres include letters, notes, and cartoons filled with wit, sadness, joy, and insight.

Nontraditional Nonfiction

Excellent nonfiction does not have to be found only in traditional prose form. Allen Say’s Drawing from Memory (Scholastic, 2011) is an illustrated autobiography of the Caldecott Medal–winning artist, with Say’s sketches, paintings, and family photographs bringing his story to colorful, glorious life. Particularly appropriate for younger readers, this work offers a glimpse inside an artist’s creative process and explores how a rigorous work ethic, not talent alone, is necessary to succeed in the field. The life of Nobel Prize–winning quantum physicist Richard P. Feynman is the subject of Feynman (First Second, 2011), a brilliant graphic biography by Jim Ottaviani and illustrated by Leland Myrick. Feynman’s groundbreaking theories and work are explored in as much detail as laypeople can understand, and the book touches on the scientist’s more eccentric personality traits and unorthodox work habits. By showing Feynman in both his professional and personal spheres, Ottaviani and Myrick present a full picture of a man who, for many, was larger than life.

No discussion of YA nonfiction would be complete without mention of Marc Aronson and Jim Murphy, who have proven time and again that they are tremendous writers of informational texts, combining sound, careful research with engaging human stories. While I would recommend all of Aronson’s titles, Space lim-
its me to mentioning only two of his more recent works. In Trapped (Atheneum, 2011), Aronson tells the story of the 33 Chilean copper miners who were trapped more than 2,000 feet beneath the earth’s surface for 69 days and those aboveground who struggled to rescue them. The narrative alternates between the human struggle of the miners, their loved ones and the rescue teams, and broader perspectives on the mining industry, along with the engineering technologies that made rescue feasible. Aronson trains his eye on 20th-century US history in Master of Deceit: J. Edgar Hoover and America in the Age of Lies (Candlewick, 2012). The book closely examines Hoover’s early years and the methods, both legal and borderline-legal, he employed to build the Federal Bureau of Investigation, until he was given almost limitless extended powers by President Roosevelt in 1936. With an unflinching eye on Hoover the man and the persona he built for himself over decades, Aronson tackles the myths around Hoover’s personal life, his craving for control and secrets, and the powerful fingerprints he left on US history and society. In both of these works, in addition to the usual bibliographies, photographs, and other informational materials, Aronson writes brief afterwords in which he explains his research processes and challenges while writing the books.

Like Aronson, Jim Murphy has a large catalog of work, but I will specifically recommend his most recent two publications. In Invincible Microbe: Tuberculosis and the Never-Ending Search for a Cure (Houghton, 2012), Murphy and his wife and coauthor, Alison Blank, present a biography of the tuberculosis microorganism, labeled “the world’s greatest serial killer.” Woven in with the history of the germ are fascinating accounts of the many treatments and hopes for cures and a social history of the disease. Murphy and Blank offer an incredible view on how our views of science and disease have changed over the centuries. Fans of Murphy’s An American Plague: The True and Terrifying Story of the Yellow Fever Epidemic of 1793 (Clarion, 2003) will want to add this to their reading list. Murphy trains his eye on a somewhat lighter subject, hoaxes and their subsequent media frenzy, in The Giant and How He Humbugged America (Scholastic, 2012). In 1869, in Cardiff, New York, workers unearthed a supposed “petrified man,” all ten feet of him. News of the Cardiff Giant quickly spread, with people traveling miles to catch a glimpse of the sight. While revealing how the giant was indeed the work of a scheming businessman, Murphy explains how the hoax exemplified America’s move into a modern age, and he links the episode to our current fascination with myths and rumors. Be sure to read the additional materials Murphy provides, including an insightful “Other Famous Hoaxes” section. This would make a fine pairing with Candace Fleming’s fantastic earlier work on the ultimate huckster, The Great and Only Barnum: The Tremendous, Stupendous Life of Showman P. T. Barnum (Schwartz & Wade, 2009).

Recognizing Nonfiction

As I’ve written this column, I’ve seen posts to several professional discussion lists in which people have wondered about the appeal and quantity of strong nonfiction for young readers. From my vantage point, the genre is as strong as it has ever been, if not stronger. Nonfiction titles do not get the attention that their fiction counterparts receive, which is a shame, because many of the titles mentioned above can easily stand up next to any other books; these nonfiction books are thor-
oughly researched, relevant, and compelling. They deserve to be recognized more by teachers, award committees, and, most of all, students. Candace Fleming, speaking at the May 2012 International Reading Association conference, shared letters written to her by students. One wrote, “Your books are like history with feelings.” Nonfiction for young readers is at a creative high point right now, and we need to be sure that students are exposed to some of these exemplary works so they can see that their world has a living, breathing history, filled with incredible personalities, stories, and the feelings that still exist in all of us.

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2013 David H. Russell Award Call for Nominations

The National Council of Teachers of English is now accepting nominations for the David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English. This award recognizes published research in language, literature, rhetoric, teaching procedures, or cognitive processes that may sharpen the teaching or the content of English at any level. Nominations of publications to be considered should be postmarked no later than March 1, 2013. Any work or works of scholarship or research in language, literature, rhetoric, or pedagogy and learning published during the past five years (i.e., between January 2008 and December 2012) are eligible. Works nominated for the David H. Russell Award should be exemplary instances of the genre, address broad research questions, contain material that is accessibly reported, and reflect a project that stands the test of time. Normally, anthologies are not considered. Reports of doctoral studies, while not precluded from consideration for the Russell Award, are typically considered as part of NCTE’s separate “Promising Researcher” program. Works nominated for the award must be available in the English language.

To nominate a study for consideration, please email the following information to fmann@ncte.org: your name, your phone, your email, author, title, publisher, date of publication, and one paragraph indicating your reasons for nominating the work. Please send four copies of the publication for distribution to the Selection Committee, or give full bibliographic information so that the Selection Committee will encounter no difficulty in locating the publication you nominate. Send nominations and materials by March 1, 2013, to: David H. Russell Award, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1010, Attn: Felisa Mann. Final selections will be announced in mid-August 2013.

Works Cited

