

Information, Please: Books to Inform and Entertain

The desire to know the facts doesn't start at adulthood. Indeed, our very youngest to our oldest enjoy those books that provide information, give us the true story, tell us about the working and wonders of our world and the people in it. This brief list offers you some titles middle schoolers will enjoy when they want some information, please.

Blizzard! Jim Murphy. Scholastic, 2000. 136 pp. A riveting account of New York City trying to survive the massive snowstorm of 1888. Murphy has the ability to take a single incident and show the ramifications it had for people, for the city, and for history.

Blood on the Forehead: What I Know about Writing. M.E. Kerr. Harper Collins, 1998. 272 pp. This pioneer of young adult literature offers readers insights into how authors get their ideas and craft successful stories. She illustrates her points with excerpts from some of her acclaimed books.

Bodies from the Bog. James M. Deem. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 44 pp. This book presents a fascinating discussion of the discovery in northern Europe of remarkably preserved bog bodies thousands of years old. The lively text is complemented throughout with illustrations, many of which are quite grotesque photographs of discovered remains.

Charles A. Lindbergh: A Human Hero. James Cross

Giblin. Clarion, 1997. 212 pp. This highly readable account of the aviator's extraordinary and controversial life provides readers a rare glimpse of the dark side of this heroic aviator.

Corpses, Coffins, and Crypts: A History of Burial. Penny Colman. Henry Holt, 1997. 224 pp. How people deal with death in different cultures and different times is documented through lively, fast-paced narrative and many contemporary and historical black-and-white photographs. The rituals and customs associated with burial make for fascinating reading.

Invisible Enemies: Stories of Infectious Diseases. Jeanette Farrell. Farrar Straus Giroux, 1998. 224 pp. This is an engrossing account of seven deadly diseases (AIDS, bubonic plague, cholera, leprosy, malaria, smallpox, and tuberculosis) that have ravaged humankind through the ages.

Knots in My Yo-yo String: The Autobiography of a Kid. Jerry Spinelli. New York: Knopf, 1998. 148 pp. Spinelli tells his story of his childhood in rural Pennsylvania. Reluctant readers will find of most interest Spinelli's own trouble in school and learning to read.

Lives of the Writers: Comedies, Tragedies (and What the Neighbors Thought). Kathleen Krull. San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1994. 96 pp. Twenty humorous, sometimes hilarious, brief portraits of writers like Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, Langston Hughes, and Mark Twain are accompanied by caricature illustrations. The text is entertaining, but also quite informative. Other books in the same format by the same author and illustrator include:

Lives of the Artists, Lives of the Athletes, Lives of the Musicians, and Lives of the Presidents.

Play with Your Food. Joost Elffers and Saxton Freymann. Stewart, Tabori, & Chang, 1997. 112 pp. Whimsical vegetable creatures presented in glorious color photographs are the main “characters” in this informational book. Step-by-step instructions are included for readers who wish to manufacture their own creatures.

Shipwreck at the Bottom of the World: The Extraordinary True Story of Shackleton and the Endurance. Jennifer Armstrong. Crown, 1998. 120 pp. A superbly written account of Sir Ernest Shackleton’s ill-fated expedition to the Antarctic aboard the *Endurance* in 1914. The text is abundantly illustrated with crewmember Frank Hurley’s astonishing photographs chronicling the ordeal. This riveting account of the expedition is particularly well suited for middle school audiences.

Sir Walter Raleigh and the Quest for El Dorado. Marc Aronson. Clarion, 2000. 222 pp. A fascinating portrait of the charismatic, complex Renaissance adventurer and his times. Superbly written and scrupulously researched, this book won the American Library Association’s Sibert Award for Best Nonfiction Book in 2001.

Terror of the Spanish Main: Sir Henry Morgan and His Buccaneers. Albert Marrin. Dutton, 1999. 224 pp. A compelling history of New World buccaneers and Sir Henry Morgan, one of their famous leaders, will be of interest to teachers of World History and to English teachers wanting examples of lively expository writing.

The Amazing Potato. Milton Meltzer. Harper Collins, 1992. The fascinating story of the awesome impact this seemingly unassuming vegetable

has had upon civilizations and history is certainly an unusual subject for a work of nonfiction. Meltzer, winner of the 2001 Wilder Award for his body of work, proves once again why he is considered a master of the informational genre.

The Middle Passage: White Ships/Black Cargo. Tom Feelings. Dial, 1995. A profoundly moving chronicle of the cruel, terrifying journey of enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean is rendered in wordless, black-and-white illustrations. The illustrations are intensely emotional, haunting, and horrific. An introduction by Dr. John Henrik Clarke offers excellent historical background on the African slave trade.

The New Way Things Work. David Macaulay. Houghton Mifflin, 1998. 400 pp. An expanded and updated edition of the incredibly brilliant and highly original guide to how machines of all kinds work. From very simple tools to mind-boggling, complex technologies, Macaulay explains all the intricacies of these devices through engaging text and astonishingly detailed illustrations.

What Are You? Voices of Mixed-Race Young People. Pearl Fuyo Gaskins. Holt, 1999. 192 pp. Gaskins presents a collection of interviews with 80 mixed-race young people discussing, in their own words, the many issues they face like dating, family life, prejudice, and struggles with their identity.

Where Will This Shoe Take You?: A Walk through the History of Footwear. Laurie Lawlor. Walker, 1996. 132 pp. The whats, whens, whys, and hows of footwear from woven bark to Air Jordans is presented in a lively, straightforward narrative complemented throughout by lots of black-and-white illustrations. Teachers might want to use this book as a jumping off point for some intriguing writing.

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