

Why should we value factual books for children?

A blog post by Andy Seed August 2020

A recent skim through bookish posts on Twitter painted the usual picture: lots of enthusiastic reviews and plugs, pictures of summer reading piles, covers of recommended kids' books and authors giving peeks of upcoming titles. As ever it was 90% fiction (including picture books) with almost no poetry and very little children's non-fic.

We simply do not have a children's non-fiction book culture in the UK like exists in most of Europe, the USA (where factual books are built into the curriculum) and many other countries. My last non-fic title sold 10x more overseas. Why is this? So many children love reading factual books. A lot prefer them. I was one of those kids - I became a reader through them. Once I was a reader I then developed a taste for fiction.

So, why don't we value factual books as much as others? Everyone I meet says they do value them and yet these books are still almost invisible in many places and in review streams. I decided to post a question on Twitter to see what people had to say. Here it is and it drew a big response!



andyseedauthor
@andyseedauthor

Why should we value factual books for children?
Answers please!



All kinds of people replied: parents, teachers, writers, illustrators, publishers, bloggers, librarians and booksellers. Here are some of the most interesting quotes:



Rashmi Sirdeshpande (away writing) @RashmiWriting · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

Factual books can also be such levellers (in an ideal world where libraries and school libraries are well funded). You can travel the world with them. Learn absolutely anything. Hopefully see yourself in those pages too and build those things into your dreams. So powerful.



Debbie Brady @DebMumBrady · 30 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

Because it often appeals to those children who don't otherwise view themselves as readers. I would say this especially true of boys and so many boys are disengaged when it comes to reading, but would thrive if presented with a decent selection of NF



Moira Butterfield @moiraworld · 28 Jul



When I write NF for kids I'm hoping to inspire them and to do that I choose a way to express facts which will spark their imagination. I would say it, but to me that's a form of writing to be valued.



Lynn Bartlett @bartlett_mrs · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @MichaelRosenYes and 9 others

We all read for information all the time. Children need to know how to search for and select information and check for accuracy. They need to learn about bias and fake news. This is arguably one of the most important literacy skills they will need.



Joan Haig @joanhaigbooks · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @Louiestowell and 8 others

All these things! And also to keep children at the 'cutting edge' of knowledge. Rewriting history to include underrepresented voices, for example.



BETA Co. @beta_co_ · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @MichaelRosenYes and 9 others

Aside from the good answers here, factual books are fantasy/escapism too! One of my favourite books as a kid was this Spy Handbook. It had real spy tactics, explained what a dead-drop is for instance. Cracking stuff.



Lorna #3.5% @Duffycaramole · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @MichaelRosenYes and 9 others

Where to start? But prime, I guess, is the fact that lots of children (and a heck of a lot of boys) just prefer fact to fiction. Why should their reading be devalued?



The Learning Teacher Librarian @TheLearningTL · 28 Jul



Replying to [@andyseedauthor](#), [@smithsmm](#) and 8 others

Increases vocabulary and opportunity to put together facts to build a larger picture and add to their existing knowledge. May play to children's interests capture reluctant readers. Enables teachers to draw on them as resources for research



Yvonne Marjot, You Know What Ink I Use @Alayanabeth · 28 Jul



Replying to [@andyseedauthor](#), [@smithsmm](#) and 8 others

Kids love facts. They love to know something they can then explain to you. Reading non-fic is a brilliant way to promote reading for kids who struggle with fiction. Gaining knowledge independently gives them confidence in themselves.



Louie Stowell @Louiestowell · 28 Jul



Replying to [@andyseedauthor](#), [@smithsmm](#) and 7 others

And now my serious answer when I'm not rushing between meetings... because the real world breeds wonder and is strange and magical and funny and sometimes hard to believe. I'm still not over square wombat poo...



Jo Clarke @bookloverJo · 28 Jul



Replying to [@andyseedauthor](#), [@smithsmm](#) and 7 others

For me non-fiction has allowed me to make connections with children who may not find fiction accessible. It has created conversations & boosted their confidence as they excitedly share fascinating facts & snippets of information. It has helped turn so many children into readers



Rashmi Sirdeshpande (away writing) @RashmiWriting · 28 Jul



Replying to [@andyseedauthor](#), [@smithsmm](#) and 8 others

WHERE DO I BEGIN? Children are Curious with a capital C. This world is endlessly fascinating and there's something for everyone. And factual books today are just so creative and punchy and juicy and downright beautiful too. You can flick through, dip in and out. Magic.



Simon Smith @smithsmm · 28 Jul



Replying to [@andyseedauthor](#), [@MrEPrimary](#) and 7 others

Firstly because children love facts...children's insatiable curiosity is fired by factual books. They are a great way into getting children immersed in reading as an enjoyable thing. "Did you know?" is one of my favourite things a child will come and say to me.



Jon Biddle @jonnybid · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 7 others

Because they're an as equally essential part of a balanced reading diet as novels, picturebooks, poetry, magazines, graphic novels, comics and everything else. If we can help children understand that all types of reading are valid, the battle is almost won.



Scott Evans (The Reader Teacher) @MrEPrimary · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 7 others

NF opens another door, another window, another opportunity and another way of reading that sometimes stories can't. If we want to provide children with the broadest and deepest of reading experiences, we have to do so by valuing NF alongside fiction, picture books and poetry.



LibraryGirl&BookBoy (Jo) @BookSuperhero2 · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

They encourage inquisitiveness and inspire awe. They can surprise and delight.



Sue Purkiss @sue_purkiss · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

Factual books open up new worlds and let children - and us - delve deeper into the one we live in. They stimulate curiosity, ideas and conversations, and they help us to explore. They are wonderful.



rosemaryhillbooks @rosemaryhillbo1 · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

Because many children like reading about facts. Shouldn't say this but when I do book fairs in boys schools that want facts, lots of them - dinosaurs, space, sport, volcanoes, rocks, you name it they want it. 80% of books sold will be non fiction.



Ben Rothery Illustration @BRillustrations · 28 Jul



Replying to @andyseedauthor, @_Reading_Rocks_ and 8 others

Because through them we can introduce children to the wonder and majesty of the world around them, children who otherwise might have limited / no access to it to the wider world beyond their immediate horizons. It's certainly why I write mine.



Kirstie - The Bookbug Lady #kirstiebookbug @KirstieBurns6 · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @MichaelRosenYes and 9 others

Because to children everything is new, exciting and fascinating. Factual books highlight the amazing in the everyday and build a foundation of knowledge that can then soar into the realms of fiction.



Fay Lant @literacyfairy · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

Reading for pleasure is wider than just reading fiction for pleasure. It's also helpful to model a broad range of text types as they develop their own reading and writing skills.



Claire Worrall @claireywo · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

They fire the natural curiosity into asking more questions and can help children work out what they are really interested in. And they are fabulous and less threatening to struggling readers who baulk at the prospect of chapter books with few images to help their understanding.



Chrissie Fadipe @ChrissieFadipe · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @MichaelRosenYes and 9 others

Factual books are very enticing, chunked information, great imagery and you leave the experience much wiser. I have never understood the enforcement of only being allowed to choose a fiction book in a school reading hour. It reeks of snobbery. Not great for differentiation.



Thomas Vasara @thvasara · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

There's just so much to say about this - as a scientist and educator, it's clear that children seek to understand the world around them, to satisfy their inner, inborn curiosity - and thus these books are the float on a sea of questions; making them real keeps them from sinking



Moira Butterfield @moiraworld · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 7 others

Lots of great support here and yet....in the 'summer books to buy your kids' lists I saw in national UK newspapers I did not see one NF book mentioned.

I was delighted to see that the reply with the most likes and retweets was this wonderfully expressed viewpoint from teacher Christopher Such:



Christopher Such @Suchmo83 · 28 Jul

Replying to @andyseedauthor, @smithsmm and 8 others

For every person who would grow into an adult who prefers to read fiction for pleasure, there is another who would be the other way round if we properly introduce non-fiction. Ensuring that kids see NF as a potential source of joy to the same extent as fiction is essential.

This builds on the point I made earlier. Adults are gatekeepers when it comes to children's books and if we don't introduce and make available a wide variety we are missing an opportunity to make readers who read for pleasure.

The other reason I love this tweet so much is for that word joy. Reading should be fun, and almost no one mentioned this aspect of factual books - so many of them present content in an enjoyable way. You'll find jokes, quips, witty text, funny illustrations, asides and all kinds of lively visual devices to bring the pages alive. As a writer of children's non-fiction, building some humour into each title is a priority because I know it will increase appeal and get more kids enjoying books.



One of the problems with these books is the label we give them. 'Non-fiction' surely wins the prize for the dreariest, most negative and unappealing name for a category of anything, never mind just books! I've said this before but it bears repeating ("*Coffee or non-coffee, madam?*"). Why on earth do we define something by what it is not?

I like the term 'factual books' because it acknowledges the huge range of this sector of reading material (more about that later). Here are some alternatives:

'Fact books' - hmmm, this does suggest that they're all just full of facts. Autobiographies and 'true-life' stories are not just books of facts - and nor are several other genres that come under the non-fiction label.

'Information books' - again, it suggests something a bit dry to me. A train timetable is information, but the remarkable true story of teenager Juliane Koepcke surviving a plane crash and her long, dangerous walk through a rainforest to reach rescue (as featured in a recent kids' non-fic title) can't really be classified as 'information', surely?

'Reference books' - what???

It doesn't help that non-fiction can also be written nonfiction and non fiction. The debate will no doubt go on but here are my thoughts on why we should value factual books for children.



1. Factual books are an unparalleled way for children to learn.

- They are written, illustrated and designed by people who know how to communicate well
- The text and images are presented at the right level for the intended age group
- They cover almost every subject, including many of the 'difficult' ones, and address topical matters
- Unlike much info found on the web, they are factually reliable

2. Factual books are a gateway to reading for pleasure for many children

- They can be matched to a child's interests
- The text is often presented in easily digested chunks to help disengaged children
- Their exciting, highly visual designs and layouts add appeal and boost communication of content

3. Factual books are often superbly illustrated

- The combination of words and pictures often makes a topic come alive
- Large, varied and colourful formats make them more inviting for reluctant readers
- They use rich combinations of great photos, drawn illustrations and graphics to feed the eye

4. Factual books are hugely varied

Non-fiction is not just information - it includes:

- Biogs
- 'True-life' stories
- Miscellanies
- Guides
- Puzzles and quizzes
- Joke books
- Activity books
- TV & film tie-ins (e.g. Doctor Who annuals)

Interestingly, these are often the types of books that capture children's interests and yet they get the smallest amount of promotion, reviews, sharing, recommendations and shelf space!

5. Factual books are a powerful way to enable children to develop as people

- Seeing the real lives of others builds empathy and understanding
- They are an excellent route into important non-curricular themes such as black history, inequality, diversity and the changing world of work
- They explain difficult concepts in effective ways.

This is a personal view from someone who has been writing factual books for nearly 20 years and who is a fervent promoter of reading for pleasure. I would love to see kids' non-fiction getting the space, enthusiasm, coverage and recognition it deserves - and for more children to be enjoying it!

Particular thanks to Scott Evans [The Reader Teacher](#) for his promotion of factual books and for everyone who contributed comments and more.

